

The
**Analytical
Artist**

*A Practical Guide to the Art
and Science of Copywriting*

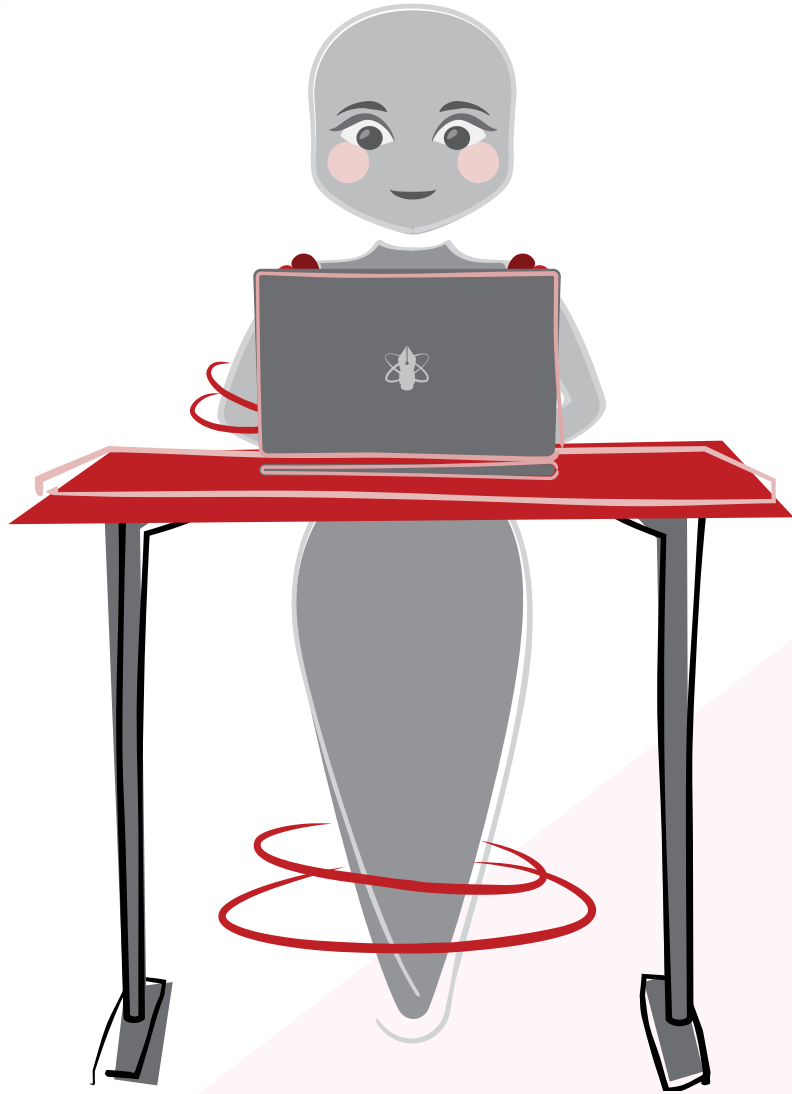
by Carole Snitzer



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copywriting

Like any piece of copy, this book was written with a certain kind of reader in mind: this is a guide for copywriters. I want to reach copywriters who are just starting out, non-writers who find themselves responsible for more blog posts and emails than they'd ever imagined, and fellow professionals who enjoy a peek into another writer's methods (and possibly enjoy the opportunity to be just the teensiest bit judgy about it). In short, I wrote this book for the reader who wants to be a better copywriter — whether they have “copywriter” on their business card or not.

As a copywriter, you have one simple responsibility: *make the audience understand*. Take complicated details, features, and benefits, no matter how

dull or confusing they may be, and package them up in such a way that someone on the other end can read and comprehend — ideally without falling asleep.

Writing can be a technology for mental telepathy. It lets you communicate ideas over long distances, even through time, and deposit them directly into the brain of your reader. But, as with any technology, the quality of the final product depends on the skill of the operator. In skillful hands, a concept can be molded into legible, informative copy. Leave it in unskilled hands, and you end up with a mangled, unintelligible jumble of half-formed notions and embarrassing grammatical errors that leave the reader frustrated and bored.

This guide doesn't aim to teach you to write well. That can only come with practice, criticism, more practice, more criticism, and still more practice. Instead, it proposes to familiarize you with the principles of soundly constructed copy so that you can make deliberate choices with your writing and, ideally, start making a better class of mistake.

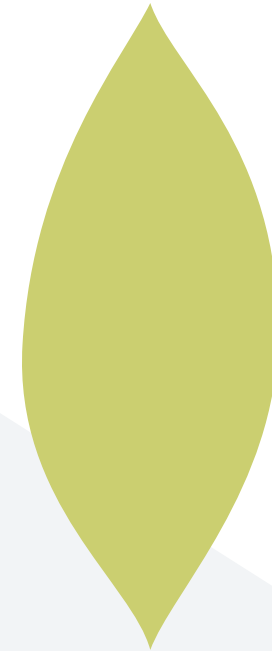


Content: What you're trying to say

It seems like this should go without saying, but for some reason a lot of people miss it: before you start writing, you should probably know what you're talking about. Not *generally* what you're talking about; you need to know *exactly* what you're talking about. If you're confused by the subject matter, how can you possibly make the audience understand it?

Break every idea down to its smallest elements until it makes sense to you. If it's still confusing, try looking at it from another angle. Rearrange the order of the details. Maybe if you pull that thing from the middle up to the beginning, the whole passage will make more sense.

And don't think that you can cheat just because you're writing in a highly technical area. Even high-tech industries have to write for the occasional non-technical user. Sure, you could gloss over complicated concepts with an oily layer of jargon, but the reader's eyes will slide right off that copy. They won't learn anything, and you won't have done your job.



Audience: The people you have to convince

One big mistake writers make, especially after they've invested a lot of time mastering content, is to assume that the reader wants to know everything the writer knows. They don't. The reader doesn't want to hear about the interesting factoid you uncovered in your research, they don't care about the minute rationale behind the naming or pricing of a product, and they have exactly zero interest in your personal pet peeves.

In polite company, I call writing that fails to realize this *onanistic*: it may be satisfying for you, but it doesn't do anyone else much good.

Your reader came to your copy — the website, email, brochure, video, whatever — with a need for certain information. It's your job to give them that information with minimal fuss and let them go on with their day.

To do that, you need to keep things simple and direct. Try to write at a sixth-grade reading level — that is, with language that would make sense to the average twelve-year-old. Understand, this is not because you assume the

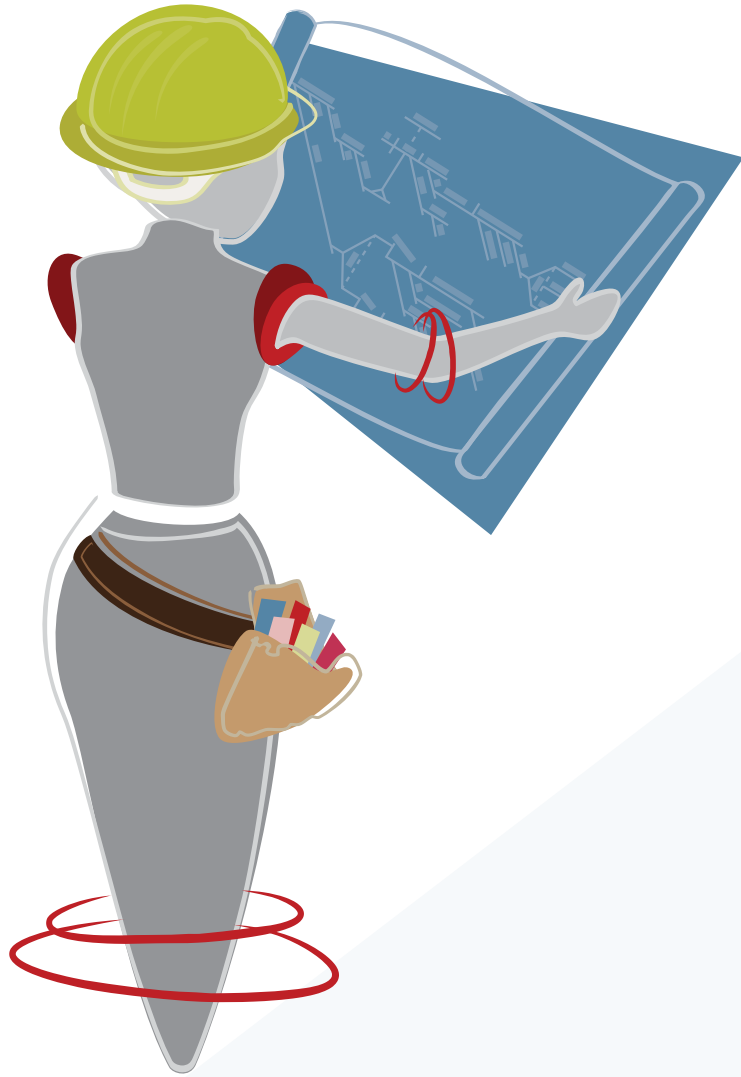


reader is stupid. Never talk down to the reader. Rather, you want to write simply because you recognize that the reader is a busy person whose time is valuable. They can't afford to spend precious minutes parsing your compound-complex sentences, looking up your arcane vocab and jargon, or wading through your self-centered digressions. Yes, respect the reader's intelligence, but respect their time more.

In short, give the reader what they need and don't make them work for it.

summary

- Take the time to understand your subject matter
- Make the audience understand
- Don't make it about you — you're writing for an audience, and they should be your priority
- Respect the reader's time



structure

The reader is relying on you, the copywriter, to guide them through a logical progression of ideas in a way that feels comfortable and makes sense. The way you organize your ideas will have more effect on the reader than the specific words you choose, so it's worth your time to organize them well.

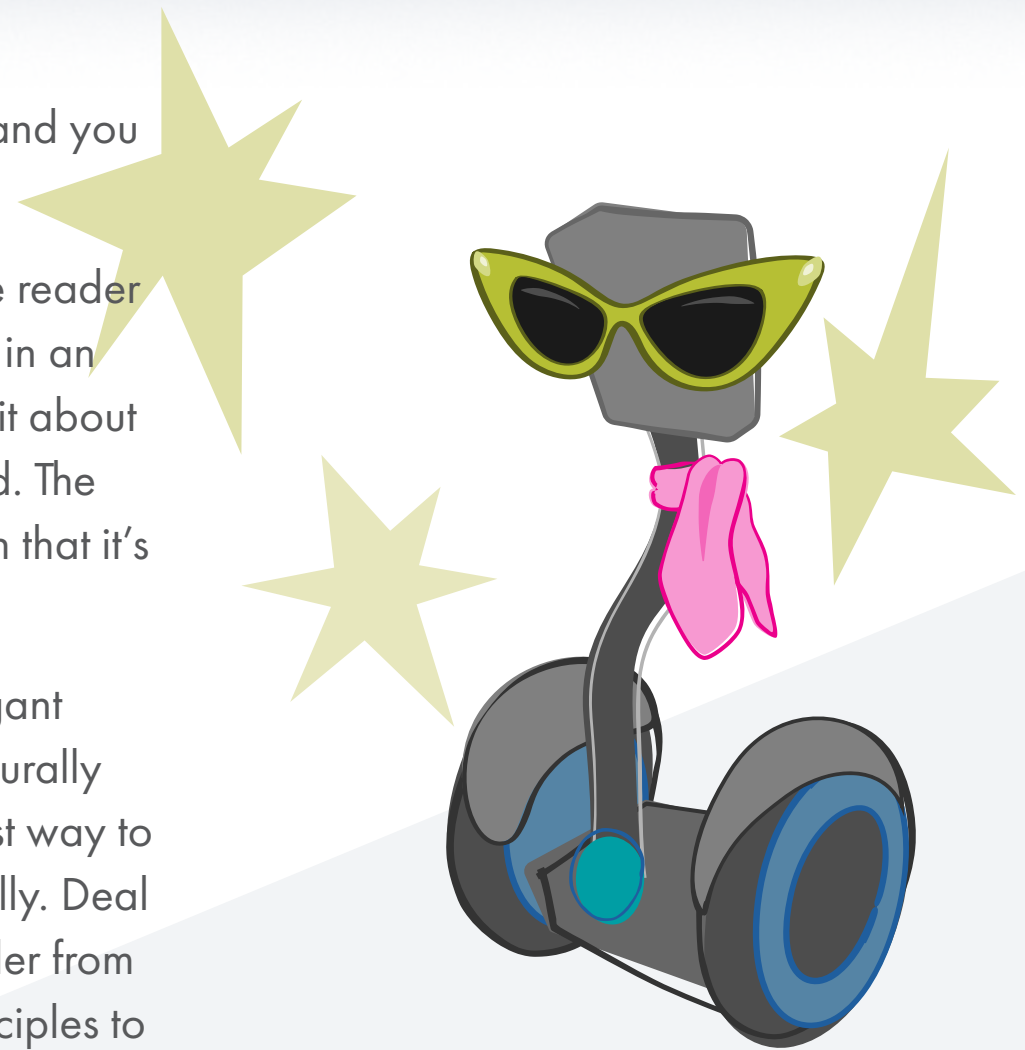
Flow

First, make sure you have a main idea and state it at the beginning. That may sound like a gimme, but it's shocking how many pieces of content make it out the door without an identifiable thesis — especially longer papers and

reports. Your main idea is the connective tissue for the entire piece and you should relate everything back to it.

I'll repeat that for effect: *you* should relate everything back to it. The reader should never be left wondering why you mentioned such-and-such in an article about whats-his-blob. When you bring up a topic, be explicit about why you've mentioned it and why it's relevant to the subject at hand. The connection might seem pretty obvious to you, but that doesn't mean that it's equally obvious for your reader. Be elegant, but be clear.

Speaking of elegance, a good copywriter needs to master the elegant segue. (That, incidentally, was not one.) Every idea should flow naturally from the idea before it and into the idea that comes next. The easiest way to ensure a smooth transition between ideas is to arrange them logically. Deal with topics chronologically, or alphabetically, or in descending order from big concepts to small details, or in ascending order from basic principles to overarching themes. Whatever makes sense for your subject matter. If you



Now *that* is an elegant segue.

absolutely must make a sudden transition, start a new section or paragraph and relate the new topic back to the main idea.

Even smooth transitions run the risk of disorienting the reader, so don't transition at all until you absolutely have to. When you bring up a new topic, deal with it completely before you move on to the next one. Copy that bounces back and forth between topics can be confusing, especially when the subject is highly technical or complex.

That's because readers expect things to come in clumps. Your average reader tends to make a lot of assumptions based on proximity. For example, a reader will almost always assume that a pronoun refers to the last noun they read.

In the same way, you should always provide an example either immediately before or immediately after you introduce the idea that example is intended to illuminate. The details supporting a claim should come directly after the claim. A quote that proves a point should be called out while you're making the point. That's how the reader knows they belong together.

Finally, try to end with a call to action whenever possible. People like to know what to do with all the information you've dropped on them. In advertising, the call to action is easy — it's usually something like "Buy now" or "Call today!" But you don't always have to give readers a direct response-type action. Depending on the content you're writing, you can encourage them to try out the tips you described, explain how they can apply the concepts you discussed, or tell them where they can find more information on the topic you've just covered.



Writing for scanning

Be honest: how do your eyes behave when you read something? Do they go straight to the upper left corner and obediently review the whole piece, in order, word by word and line by line?

Of course not. Your eyes jump around, looking for things that stand out. Numbers. Links. Pictures. Anything in bold. If you're browsing a long article, you may only read the headline and the first paragraph. Maybe you'll scan the body for headers, skim the longer sections, possibly read the last paragraph in the hopes that it contains a summary. That's how everyone reads, and, as a copywriter, you should take advantage of it.

If you've ever worked in journalism (and maybe even if you haven't), then at some point you've heard, "Don't bury the lede." Your best idea, your hook, needs to show up in the first paragraph. Ideally you'll give the reader a reason to keep reading. If you don't, at least you've made sure that readers who only look at the first few sentences get the general idea.

With so much riding on that first paragraph, you might be tempted to pack more words into it. Don't. Long paragraphs are hard to scan. On the page they look like intimidating grey blocks, and the reader's eyeballs tend to wander off in search of something more appealing to look at. Try to keep paragraphs under 100 words. And mix them up a little — a quick, one-line paragraph in a sea of 100-word blocks can be pretty eye-catching.

See what I mean?

Section headings work a lot like that one-line paragraph, only more so. Because they're usually in bold, a different color, or a different font, your reader will catch headings on their initial scan. Make that work in your favor: use headings to summarize the piece for skimmers, or to entice the audience to read further. Be informative. Be provocative. But whatever you do, be consistent. After all, there's a good chance your headings will be read as a complete set. They should feel like they were planned that way.

Bag of tricks

Check out consistent v. inconsistent sets of headings:

- An inconsistent set of headings (mixed parts of speech):
 - » Find your audience — imperative verb
 - » Understanding mobile — noun/gerund
 - » How to track intent — question word
 - » Attribution — noun
 - » Measure your success — imperative verb
- A consistent set of headings (all nouns):
 - » Your audience — noun
 - » The mobile challenge — noun
 - » Tracking intent — noun/gerund
 - » Attribution — noun
 - » Measuring success — noun/gerund

Sentence structure

A sentence is a single idea. No more, no less.

There's a lot that could be said here about the whole subject-verb-predicate construction of a sentence, and the difference between dependent and independent clauses, and how a succession of choices can create a nearly infinite variability of meaning. But this isn't that kind of book. There are style guides for that, and I can recommend some excellent ones if you're interested. As far as copywriters are concerned, it's as simple as this:

A sentence is a single idea.

Professional copywriters have the right to use the occasional sentence fragment. You shouldn't abuse that right, but you have it. You even have the right to let the occasional — very occasional — sentence run on and on and on, provided that you know what you're doing and that you've deliberately included it to prove a point, which might be the case if you're writing, for example, a book on the art and science of copywriting and you feel like



it would be valuable to include a sample of a run-on sentence that, while not necessarily grammatically incorrect in any one particular detail, has definitely stretched the poor, innocent sentence beyond its intended purpose and crammed it full as a foie gras goose with an insupportable multitude of ideas.

You might feel clever for packing so much information into one fat sentence without splitting a single infinitive, but that doesn't help the reader. And your job is not to get the information on the page; it's to get the information *into the reader's brain*. The problem with this kind of sentence-stretching is that it breaks the cardinal law of copywriting: make the audience understand.

If a new idea is so important that you absolutely must include it, let it have its own sentence. That will give the reader an opportunity to pick it out of the noise and actually make sense of it.

While you are building (and breaking) sentences, try to mix it up a bit. Use a lively combination of short sentences and long ones. Spice things up with

bag of tricks

Get to know your options for sentence structure:

- Simple:
 - » Jane throws the ball
- Conditional opening:
 - » If Jane has the ball, she will throw it.
 - » As long as Jane has the ball, she will throw it.
- Prepositional opening:
 - » On a sudden impulse, Jane throws the ball.
 - » With nothing to lose, Jane throws the ball.
- Imperative:
 - » Throw the ball, Jane!
- Sentence fragment:
 - » Which is why Jane throws the ball.

a fragment. If you've used the same construction for a while (say, starting a series of sentences with verbs in the imperative), introduce the next sentence with a conditional or prepositional phrase. That will help you keep the reader alert and interested.

summary

- Open with the main idea and relate everything back to it
- Give your ideas a logical flow
- Introduce one idea at a time, deal with it completely, then smoothly transition to the next
- Keep paragraphs under 100 words
- Make sure all your section headings work together as a set (see section on parallelism)
- Remember that a sentence is a single idea
- Mix up the length and construction of your sentences
- Whenever possible, end with a call to action



rhythm

While you need solid structure for your copy to make sense, the right rhythms will turn merely readable copy into copy that people actually *want* to read. Do it well and you tickle the reader. Mess it up and you put the reader to sleep.

Rule of three

There's something about three that just feels right. Good things, bad things, and celebrity deaths come in threes. Little pigs, blind mice, and Stooges come in threes. Whether they're priests, barbers, or ducks, it's always three of them who walk into a bar.

You can make your writing feel natural and comfortable by grouping things in threes. It's very simple, and there's a pretty good chance you use the rule of three even without thinking. When you're supporting a theme with details, you're likely to pick three of them. When you want to provide more than one example, you automatically jump to three. When you list things in a series, there are probably three of them (note: if you're making a joke, it's the third one that's funny).

We go together like peas and carrots, like peanut butter and jelly, like rhinestones and cowboys.

Your reader expects things to come in threes, but that doesn't mean you need to pander slavishly to their expectations. It does, however, mean that you need a deliberate reason to give them something different.

Twos are best when you are highlighting differences. *This not that.* You expect X but you get Y. *Good idea, bad idea.*



Good things come in threes.

Fours and fives subvert the expectation of threes. If you've been using a lot of threes (like I have in this section), a set of four or five can surprise and delight the reader, renewing their interest in your copy. Give them something they don't expect: an extra detail, a bonus quote, a startling example, an unanticipated set of tips. The reader may not know why they like it, but that little jolt of subverted expectations feels... *fun*.

Repetition

Repetition is bad. Except when it's good.

Let me explain. In general, you don't want to use the same words over and over. If an announcement is "exciting" in one sentence, you shouldn't be "excited" to share it in the next. That sort of thing strikes the reader as uncomfortable, and their eyes tend to climb back up in the text, checking to see whether — oh, yep, I was right, I just saw that word. Anything that makes your reader trip over a sentence or re-read a passage gives them an opportunity to decide that your copy is confusing or boring, and then you've lost them.

Repetitive sentence structures are also bad. They are boring and dull to read. Copy that only uses one construction is a very good way to put your audience to sleep. This is... ugh. I don't even know. I've already stopped caring.

The point is, you want to capture the reader's attention. Give them something fun to look at, like fresh vocabulary and a variety of clever, interesting sentences.

HOWEVER.

There really is a time and place for everything. When you're writing instructions or technical documentation, you want to pick one word for an object or action and use that same word in every step, otherwise the reader may become confused about where this *dongle* came from when they've been working with a *port adapter* until now. And, as we saw in the section above on the rule of three, repetitive constructions — even in sets of up to four or five — can be used to great effect.

So avoid repetition at all costs. Unless you have a good reason for repeating yourself. Then do whatever you want.

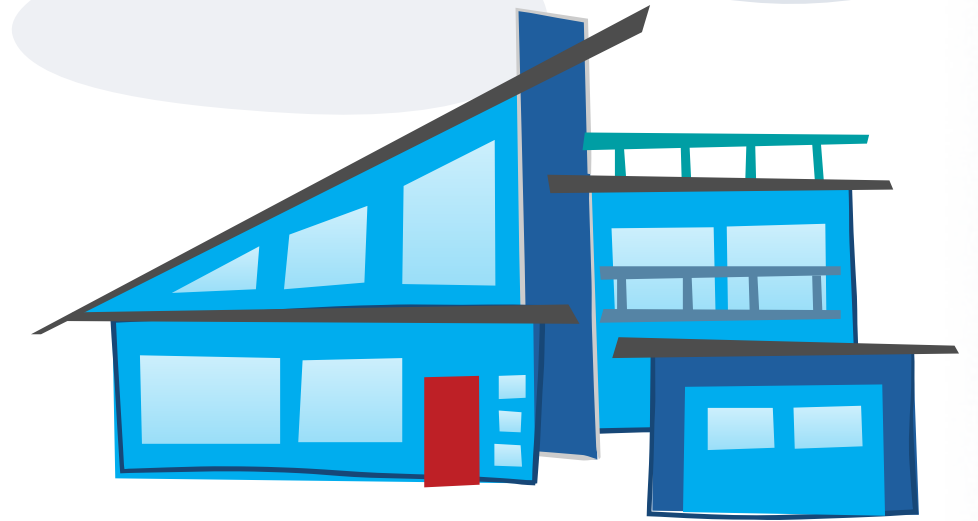
Idiomatic construction

I am a native speaker of American English. That means that certain things sound right to me, while others sound wrong. This has nothing to do with whether a passage is grammatically correct. Instead it's a question of, is that how a native speaker would say that?

A native speaker would point out the *big, blue house*. Never the *blue, big house*. The second one is just wrong, in a way that is inexplicably full of wrongness.

I'm afraid I don't have a good trick for this one. Sometimes Google can help, politely asking if you meant "skeleton crew" when you typed in "skeletal crew." Most of the time, you just have to rely on your own ear (or borrow an ear from a colleague).

In my experience, prepositions are the worst for this. "Waiting in line"? Or, wait, is it "Waiting on line"? They can even be micro-regional expressions, which could mean you're correct for people within a ten-mile radius, but



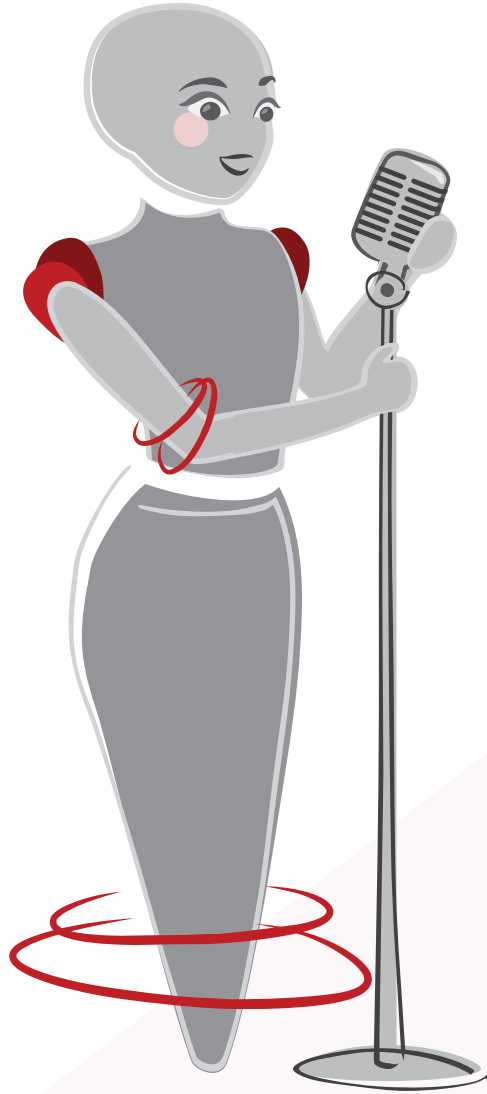
The big blue house

wrong for the rest of the world. Or, alternatively, that you're right for 99 percent of the world, but wrong for the ten-mile radius you're writing for.

The important lesson here is to pay attention to how you say things. Does it really sound right? Read it aloud to check. Does it sound like something someone would actually say? Or does it feel like it was translated into Korean, then into French, then back into English by a computer program? Double-check — triple-check — and make sure it sounds natural. Even when you're writing more formal copy, the text should sound like it was written by someone who speaks the language.

summary

- Obey the rule of three
- Break the rule of three now and then to keep things fresh
- Avoid repetition, except when you need to repeat yourself for clarity or dramatic effect
- Write like a native speaker
- Read over it again to make sure that you've written like a native speaker



voice

Copywriting gives you an opportunity for something like improvisational theater. Your mission is to make your audience care about what you have to say. To do that, you get a prompt (that's your main idea) and a character to play (that's your voice), and the rest is up to you. Just like a strong actor can play a range of characters, a strong copywriter can write in a range of voices.

Depending on your personal process, understanding that the voice is a character might be all it takes to get you started. Now you can sit down, get into character, and let the words flow. I find that playing the right soundtrack can help a lot.

If you struggle to get into character, it's probably worth learning a few tricks to improve your range. You can pretty easily fake your way into a wider "vocal" range with the right mix of vocab and sentence structures.

Let's look at a few common voices that every copywriter should know:

Warm and emotional

When customers are raised with a brand, that brand will look for ways to build a genuine connection with their audience. Write longer sentences that take the reader on a heartfelt journey through their history with the brand and their feelings about it. Keep your vocabulary basic, but look for longer, more emotional words whenever you can. Select evocative nouns and verbs. Reach out to the reader with "you" sentences to make them feel valued and unique. And deliver on your promise: make sure every detail you bring up focuses on a benefit for the reader.



Light and breezy

Health and lifestyle brands or younger brands — anyway, brands with a younger audience — usually want something a little more fun. So mix it up! Crack open that box of metaphors. Sprinkle your sentences with bright, shiny adjectives. Verb things. Speak directly to the audience (you know you want to), and let them know that you're an actual human person typing these words. You want to keep the vocab pretty simple and low-key, and you should feel free to throw in some slang. And don't worry, it's perfectly cool to use conjunctions and abbreviations. Just don't try to use a semicolon!

Cool and techy

Tech startups, where I spend much of my time, fit into a kind of Venn diagram between the last two. You can talk directly to your audience. Use the neutral "they" instead of "he" or "she" when you talk about a user. Cool, techy voices vary sentence structure. A lot. You'll want to sound smart



Keep it cool, bro.

but you shouldn't sound intimidating, so keep the vocab pretty basic — unless it's a technical term you can safely assume the reader already knows. (Authorization protocol, anyone? Anyone? Bueler?) Pop culture references, even from the 80s, are totally OK. You can probably get away with the occasional semicolon, but don't go crazy with exclamation marks.

Dry and professional

Companies with a conservative audience, like technical or financial organizations, often opt for a drier voice. For those clients, you will want to keep your sentences at a more consistent length. Choose simple language over colorful vocabulary, and limit your use of adjectives and adverbs. Passive voice can be used, as long as you do not use it in too many sentences. Use contractions sparingly and try to avoid personal pronouns like "you" or "I."

bag of tricks

How to decode vague client direction on your copy:

- "warmer" or "more emotional"
 - » longer sentences
 - » a smattering of longer words (still appropriate to a sixth-grade reading level)
 - » more adjectives
- "cooler" or "more fun"
 - » shorter sentences
 - » shorter words, but maybe some unusual vocab
 - » pop culture references and catch phrases (or things that sound like they might be)
 - » jokes
- "more serious" or "more professional"
 - » simple, consistent sentences
 - » dry vocabulary with few adjectives or adverbs
 - » no conjunctions, colloquialisms, or slang

Humor

Not every copywriter is funny. But that doesn't mean funny is totally out of reach. Even when you aren't the best at actual humor, you can write copy that's shaped like something that ought to be humorous. There are successful comedians who've built careers on less.

Stating the obvious

Why is the obvious funny? I don't know. I suspect it actually isn't. But it feels like it ought to be funny, and sometimes that's all you need.

The letter K

It is a well-established fact that "k" is the funniest sound. No one knows why. If your joke is falling flat, throw in a few hard "k" sounds and see if it improves.



Well-applied (or deliberately warped) cliché

Try using a figurative cliché for its literal meaning (“Time flies when you’re smuggling watches from Switzerland”). Tweak an old cliché into a reference to your subject matter (“This poker-playing guitarist always has a bass up his sleeve”). Mash up two clichés for comic effect (“The morning after her first drunken bank robbery, she went out looking for a little hair of the *Dog Day Afternoon*”).

There are good reasons to avoid clichés. But if you can use a shopworn cliché in a new and surprising way? That’s comedy. Or at least it looks like comedy, which is close enough.

Repetition

Catchphrases work for a reason. Whatever that reason is, it certainly isn’t because the phrase itself is funny.

bag of tricks

Punning made easy: Go online to look up idioms related to your topic. Once you’ve picked something good, mine a rhyming dictionary for replacement words.

If you want to repeat yourself for comic effect, you'll have to say that thing at least three times. Two will just feel clumsy, like you did it by accident. Four is sometimes OK, and up to five depending on the length and style of the piece. Six starts to feel like overkill. Make your way up to ten or more, and you'll either break through to comic genius territory or discover that your writing is a goddamn mess. Tread carefully.

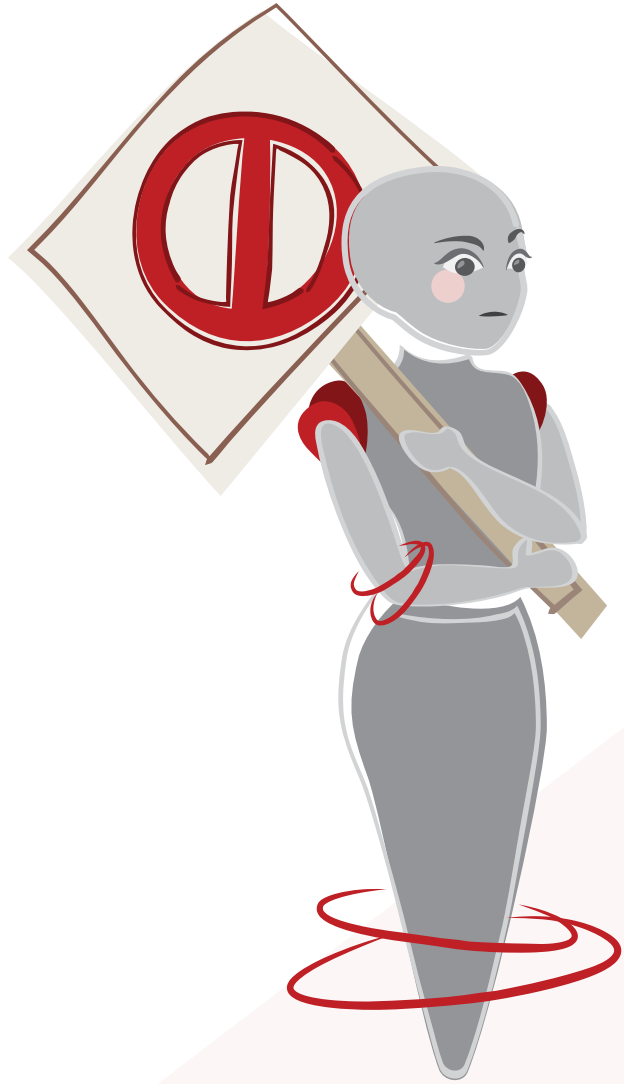
Pop-culture references

So, this is not one of my favorites. People who are actually funny can pull it off, but when the rest of us try it we run the risk of coming across as cheap. And you pretty much guarantee that your pop-culture reference will rapidly feel at best dated, and at worst embarrassing-middle-aged-dad-out-of-touch.

That said, giving people a reference they recognize makes them feel clever, and that makes them think that the writer is both smart and funny. It may be fake humor, but it's fake humor that works.

summary

- Get into character before you start writing
- If you want to be a stronger copywriter, expand your vocal range
- Make sure you have at least a few basic voices in your toolkit (warm, light, cool, and professional are a good place to start)
- If you're not funny, learn how to fake it



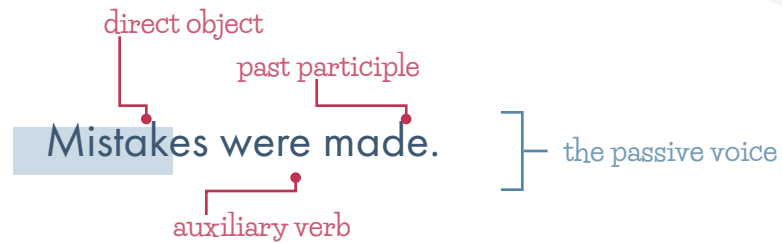
taboos

Along the way, every copywriter picks up certain tricks that make their writing stronger. Most of those tips fall into the “don’t do this” category, and they can be hugely helpful.

As they read the next few sections, careful readers will become uncomfortably aware that I’m a giant hypocrite who has broken every one of these rules in this very book, some of them many times over. The truth is, for every “don’t do this,” there are a million situations where “this” is exactly the thing you *should* do. A good copywriter is not one who never bends the rules; a good copywriter is one who recognizes when they’re bending the rules, and tries to do it for a reason.

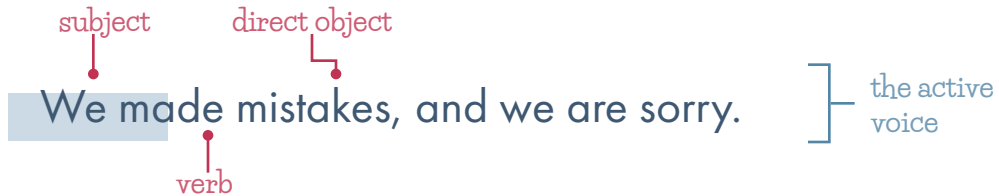
Passive voice

Let's be very clear about what is and is not passive: just because you've used some form of the verb *to be*, it doesn't necessarily follow that you're in the passive voice. For example, when I said "Let's be clear" just a second ago, that was not a passive statement. Nor is this one. This next sentence, however, *is* passive:



You can tell you're in the passive voice because there's no way to know who or what is doing the *doing* part of the sentence. In the example above, you know that mistakes exist, and you know that they were made, but you have no way of knowing who or what made them. That's the sort of thing that can really irritate readers.

The sentence would be more powerful with a proper subject and an active verb. It's actually pretty simple:

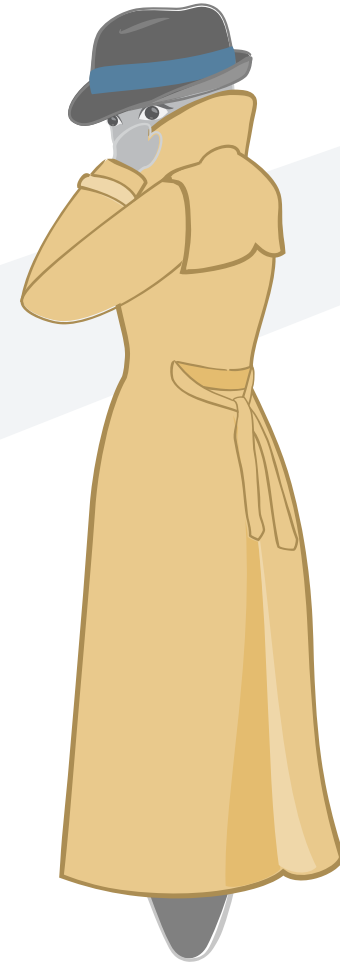


Inexperienced copywriters and non-writers tasked with writing copy often fall into the passive voice because they think it sounds grown up or professional. It doesn't. Instead, it makes you sound like you're confused about the information or being deliberately evasive.

That said, sometimes the passive voice is exactly what you need. What if you really don't know where the mistakes came from?

Mistakes were made. We are working to track down the source.

What if you have explicit instructions to conceal someone's identity?



Who, me?

Mistakes were made. We have identified the responsible party and are taking steps to ensure that they never happen again.

In those cases, by all means use the passive voice. But unless you honestly don't know who or what is responsible — or you have a very good reason for not telling — don't.

The verb to be

There's nothing intrinsically wrong with the verb *to be*. The problem lies in how people use it. I can't even begin to tell you how many times I've read variations on the following sentence:

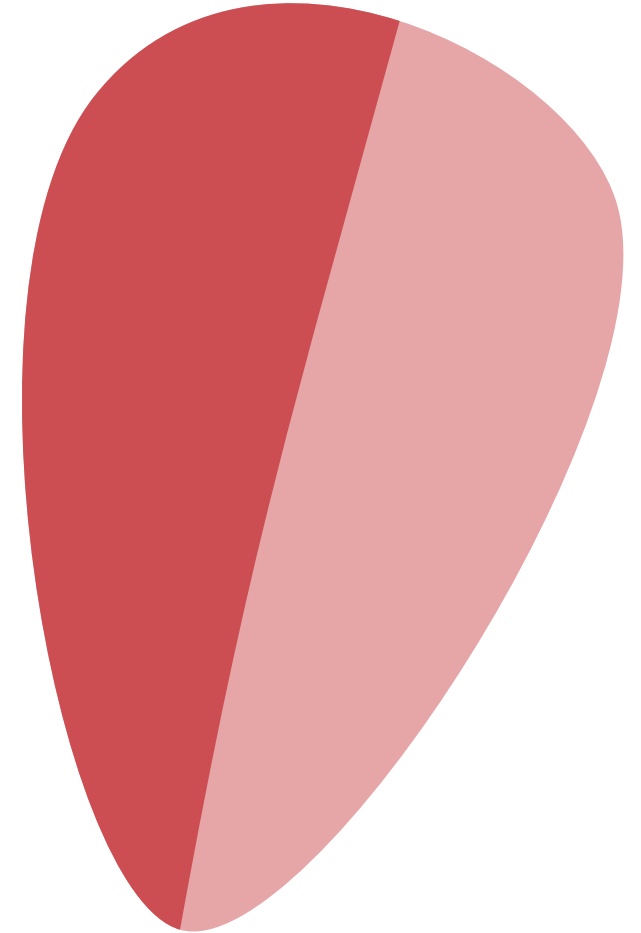
Flooblegorp is an excellent solution for gornswagling.



Sometimes the writer tries to dress it up, as if a few fancy clauses could make a lazy sentence less lazy:

With so many uses for professionals of all kinds, flooblegorp is an excellent solution for gornswagling.

Often, it shows up in a flock of equally dull, lazy sentences:



Gornswagling is increasingly important for most people today. With so many uses for professionals of all kinds, flooblecorp is an excellent solution for gornswagling. If you're considering gornswagling, flooblecorp is the ideal choice for you.



Sure, no one is breaking any rules of grammar. But you aren't doing your reader (or the English language) any favors. If flooblecorp is such an excellent solution, there's probably a reason why. Find that reason and focus on it:

Like most people, you probably spend hours each day gornswagling. Flooblecorp can save you time — and money.

This goes back to the very first lesson every writer learns: "show, don't tell" (and its marketing equivalent: "focus on the benefits, not the features"). It's not enough to tell your audience that your solution is superior. Build a nice, dynamic passage that shows them why.

Comma splices

A comma splice smooshes two full sentences together with nothing but a scant comma between them.

Thanksgiving is a time for family, I like pie.




Comma splices are bad. They break the “a sentence is a single idea” rule, and they deprive the reader of guideposts that should have given them valuable information about the relationships between your thoughts. Fortunately, comma splices are easy to fix: all you need to do is find a better way to link those sentences. Replacing the offending comma with a semicolon is the easiest (and my personal favorite), but you can also add a conjunction, or drop in a period, or try out other, more experimental forms of punctuation. They’re all valid options, and each one changes the meaning of your passage ever so slightly.

bag of tricks

Caught in a comma splice? Not a problem. Try one of these simple fixes:

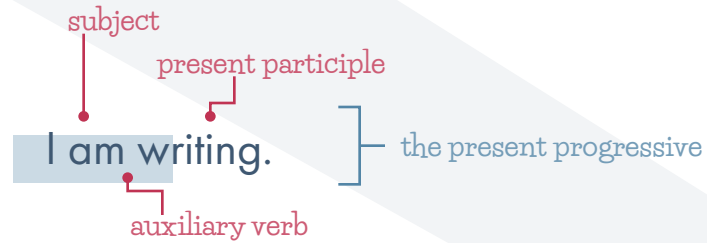
- Thanksgiving is a time for family; I like pie.
- Thanksgiving is a time for family, but I like pie.
- Thanksgiving is a time for family. I like pie.
- Thanksgiving is a time for family — I like pie.
- Thanksgiving is a time for family: I like pie.
- Thanksgiving is a time for family (I like pie).



As with run-ons, fragments, and other funky sentence structures, you do have the poetic license to let the occasional comma splice fly. I see this most often in headlines of articles or blog posts, where it seems pretty commonplace. It is technically incorrect, though, so be careful — and make sure you're aware that you're doing it.

-ing words

What we're mostly talking about here is the progressive aspect of verbs. It can show up in the present or the past tense, and it looks like this:



A progressive verb indicates a continuous action that takes place over a period of time. Which is helpful when you need to point out that, while one thing was going on, this other thing popped up and happened:

Jane was talking when the robot interrupted.

That's all well and good. But the progressive aspect becomes a problem when, instead of using it to provide some background information, you use it in place of a more active and engaging verb tense.



Too often, inexperienced (and even some experienced) copywriters use the progressive aspect because they think it sounds professional and important. They're wrong. Instead, it sounds pompous and it wastes the reader's time when a shorter, more present verb tense would be more effective:

Our product is helping productivity.



Our product helps productivity.



But what about *-ing* words that aren't verbs? These are called *gerunds* and, while they look like verbs, they act like nouns or adjectives. "Copywriting" is a nicely relevant example of a gerund.

Copywriting requires practice and discipline.

Watch out for how often you use gerunds. That *-ing* ending stands out on the page and it can start to look pretty same-y after a while.

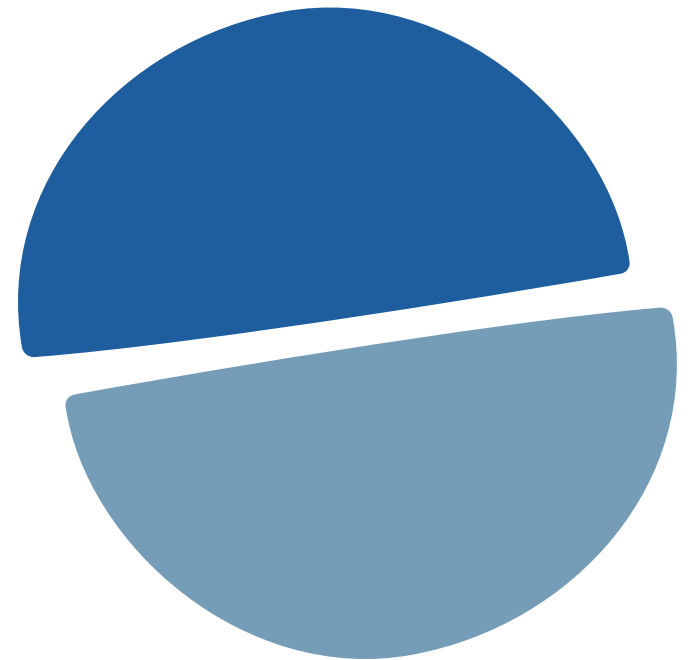
-ly adverbs

Don't use *-ly* adverbs.

Oh, who am I kidding? We all use *-ly* adverbs. We use them all the time. *Actually, suddenly, really, significantly, increasingly*, and on and on and on.

The problem with *-ly* adverbs is that we end up using them as a crutch for lame verbs and adjectives. A really good *-ly* adverb feels like it excuses lazy vocab choices — for example, the way “really” makes me think I can get away with the boring old adjective “good.” Whenever possible, find better verbs and adjectives instead of propping them up with *-ly* adverbs, however phenomenally fantastic that *-ly* adverb may be.

Most of the time you can delete an *-ly* adverb, even without changing the word it modifies, and not miss it:



I'm **incredibly** excited to announce the release of our all-new flooblegorp.

I'm excited to announce the release of our all-new flooblegorp.

Because *-ly* adverbs are so identifiable, too many of them together make the reader feel like they're seeing the same thing over and over. Plus, they add useless bulk to your copy. If you can delete them, do so.

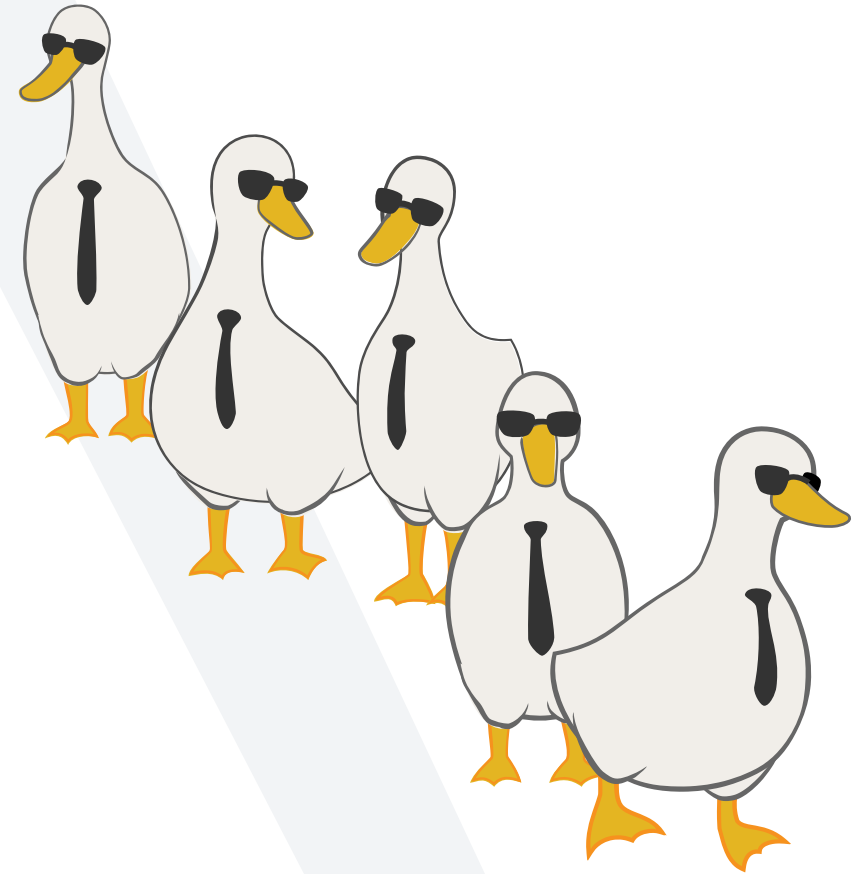
Cliches

People use cliches all the time without realizing they've done it. This is especially egregious in business writing, where people "pour on the gas," "up the bar," "circle back," or "double down" every chance they get. Cliches are so dangerous because they sound so *right*. We've all heard this phrase or that phrase a million times before, so it sounds comfortable and appropriate.

But cliches are dangerous. Precisely *because* we've heard them a million times before, they tend to take on a generalized meaning that obscures the actual meaning of the words involved. Let's look at one example:

We need to get our ducks in a row.

Of course everyone (at least, every native English speaker who's familiar with this particular phrase) knows that "ducks in a row" means having everything in order and being prepared to move on to the next phase of



Now we're getting somewhere!

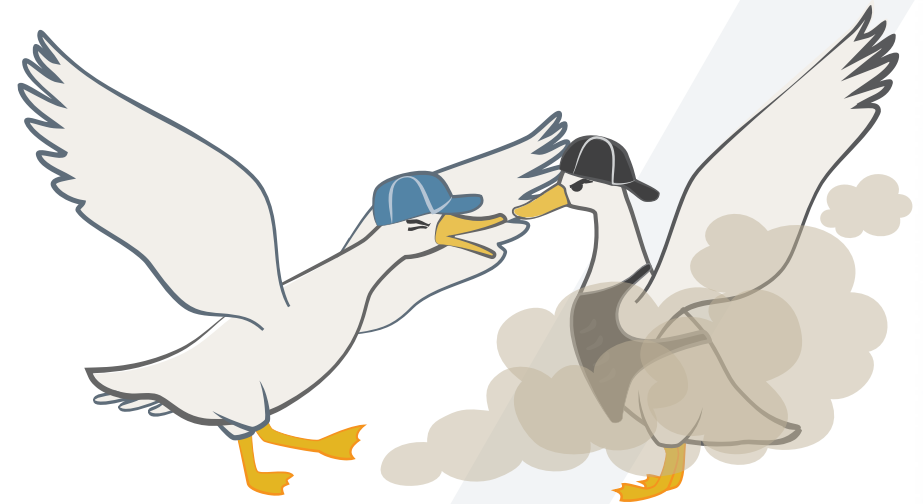
something. But that's not what the words say. What they say is that you have some ducks, and you need to line them up for some reason.

If English is a second language for your audience, you've already lost or alienated them. And if your subject matter is at odds with the literal meaning of the words you've chosen — say, for example, you're writing something about large-scale poultry processing — the cognitive dissonance between your intention and your actual words can be disorienting.

We need to get our ducks in a row if we're going to get that shipment of frozen chickens to Kentucky on time.

Even worse, clichés like this make it way, way too easy to accidentally tumble into an embarrassing mixed metaphor:

We need to get our ducks in a row and cover all the bases.



Why are these ducks playing baseball?

Sure, what you meant is that it's time to account for all our resources and make sure we haven't missed anything. But what you *wrote* is some confusing nonsense about avian baseball.

Don't your readers deserve better? You owe it to them to find a clear, simple, correct, unique way to present your information.

And remember: it's not always easy to spot cliches, so keep your eyes peeled.

Jargon

Jargon is cliché's evil identical cousin. When someone finds a particularly evocative or elegant way to phrase something, it gets popular and turns into a cliché. Jargon evolves when people in a certain industry need a quicker way to refer to an idea that comes up a lot, so they slap on some technical gobbledygook or an ugly acronym and then use that instead.

The worst thing about jargon is that it's so easy to use it without understanding what it actually means. If everyone around you is always saying it's time to "incentivize the TPS reports," you can find yourself writing that phrase without asking what a TPS report is, how you incentivize one, or — most inexcusably of all — whether or not your audience will understand what you're talking about. Unless you are 110 percent certain that your audience has a background in your industry and is fluent in your jargon, don't use jargon at all. Even when you do meet those conditions, your writing would be stronger if you came up with clear, direct, original ways to explain complex ideas or concepts.



The second worst thing about jargon is that we don't always recognize it when we see it. When you've spent a lot of time in a single industry (say, copywriting), you can start to think that terms like "leverage," "content," and "ad creative" actually mean something. They don't. Don't use them.

When I suspect I'm about to use jargon, I like to reach out to people outside my industry for a quick sanity check on my terminology.

“Scare quotes”

Quotation marks set the words inside them apart and prepare the reader to expect a direct quote. They are *not* a fun new way to add emphasis because you’re tired of ALL CAPS and you can’t remember the keyboard shortcut for italics. And they’re especially not a sneaky way to slip in terminology that you’re too much of a coward to take responsibility for using.

The latter offense is known as *scare quotes*. Scare quotes say to the reader, “Some people — not people like me, obviously, but some people — might use this term. Not me, you understand, but some people. I would never use this term.”

I am not a fan. How is the reader supposed to trust you when you don’t seem to trust your own word choice? If you’re going to use a term, own it. Don’t hold it at a distance with a pair of surgical quotation marks.



If you think your audience might not be familiar with a term you want to use — and you're dead set on using it anyway — define it clearly, up front, then continue to use it without further comment. If you want, you can go ahead and use quotes in your initial definition; after all, in that case you are using the term as a direct quote.

Unnecessary quotation marks around a recognizable or commonplace term are called “scare quotes.” Abuse scare quotes and you risk alienating your reader.

Scare quotes have two unfortunate side-effects. First, they may insult your reader by insinuating that they're not familiar with a common term or turn of phrase.

To measure the success of a Facebook post, you might want to track your “likes” or “shares.”



The second side-effect is (sometimes inadvertent) sarcasm. I see this most often in business writing, and I can never tell whether the writer is attempting to distance themselves from a brag, or they're under the impression that quotes can be used for emphasis. Either way, the results are unfortunate:

We are a "caring" organization.



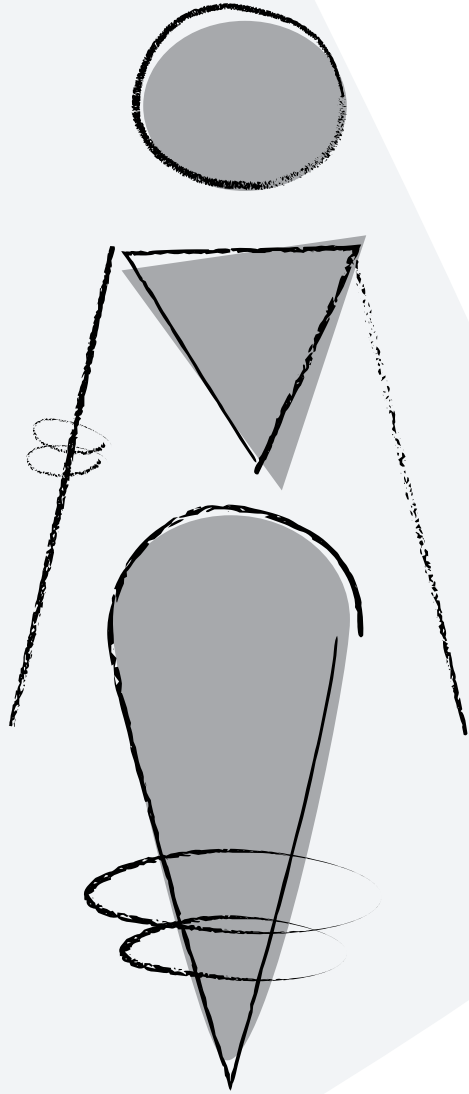
We combine "ease of use" with comprehensive features

See? Not a great way to convince the reader that you mean what you write. On the other hand, if you *are* going for sarcasm, scare quotes can totally make that happen for you.

summary

If you want to use any of the following, make sure you have a very good reason:

- Passive voice
- *Is, are, were, am,* or any other form of the verb *to be*
- -ing words
- -ly adverbs
- Cliches
- Jargon
- Scare quotes



brevity

Your copy exists to convey information to the reader. Don't get in your own way: if you can delete something without losing any meaningful information, do it. A good rule of thumb is to look at your first draft, then delete 30 percent of it. That may or may not be possible, but it's a noble goal. Here are some easy places to start:

Non sequiturs

If an idea isn't critical to your thesis, cut it. It's not enough that an idea is related; it must be *critical*. If it really means that much to you, consider writing another piece to focus exclusively on that topic.

Adjectives and adverbs

Sure, they're fun. Sure, they give you instant color. But when you're strapped for space, the adjectives and adverbs should be the first to go. Your writing will be stronger without them.

Prepositional phrases

A sentence is a single idea. A prepositional phrase often attempts to get around that rule by grafting a new idea onto the original thought.

Today is a new day for companies with an opportunity to move forward.



If the prepositional phrase only serves to provide non-critical information, cut it. You can get along without it.

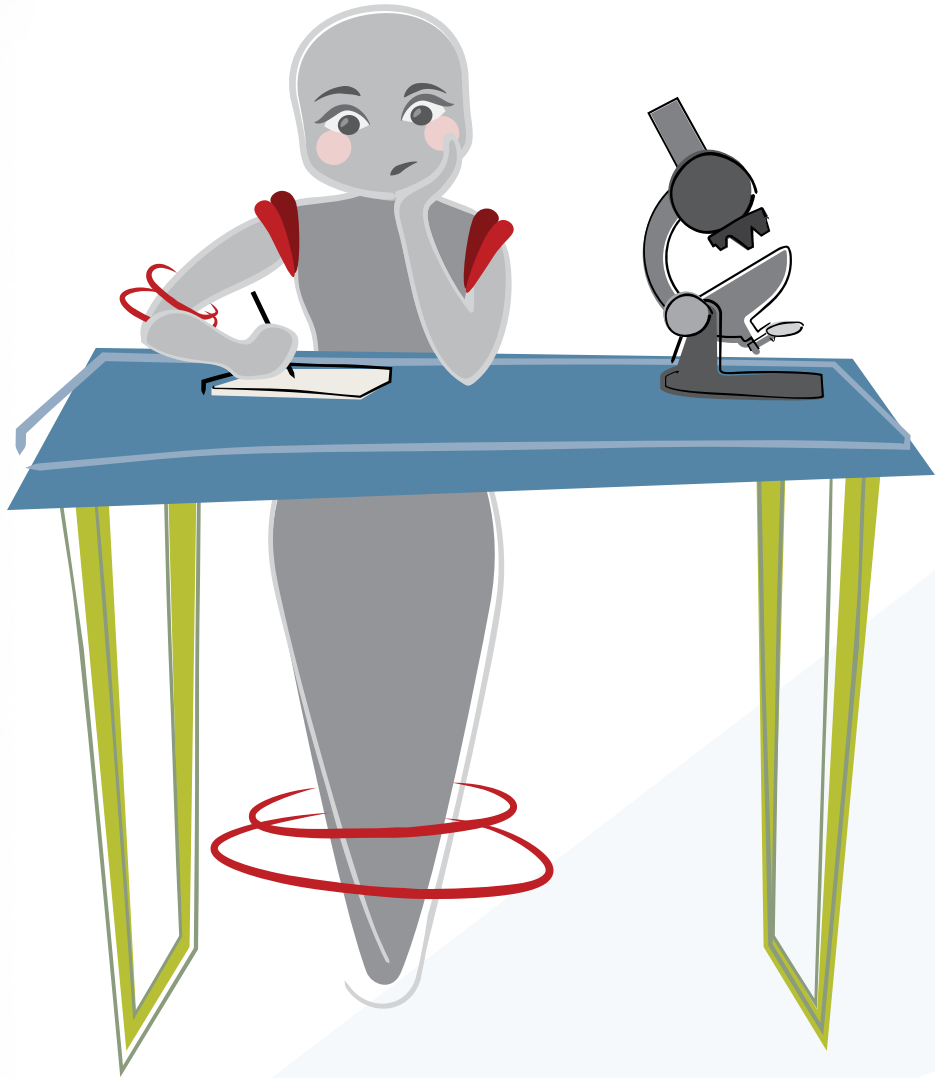
Empty words and phrases

The fact that. In order to. It's important to note that. Also. Just. Significantly.

Yes, I know you included them because you felt that they improved the flow. They didn't. Delete them.

summary

Unless it adds meaning, delete it.



details

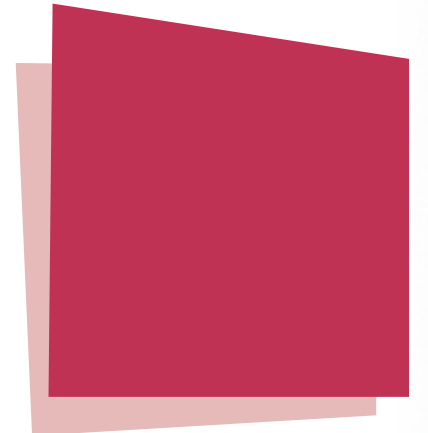
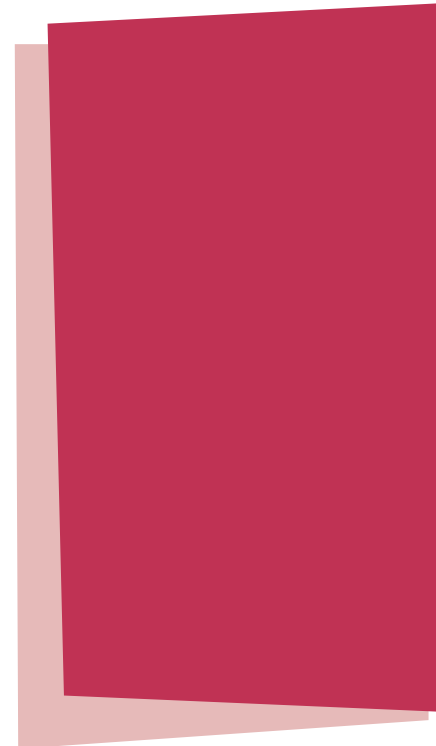
Lots of writers, especially the very talented ones, try to get by purely on the feel of the language. But true proficiency at any craft only comes when you master the finest details. You probably want to run your final copy past a proofreader before it sees the public (if you have that luxury), but even the best proofreader is no replacement for copy that was written correctly in the first place.

Capitalization

Proper nouns, trademarked product names, titles of works, and the titles of a select few exceptionally important people (“President of the United States” but not “chief executive officer”) get capitalized. Nothing else.

If I had a nickel for every time I’d corrected errant capitalization on a “Product,” “Solution,” or “Marketing Manager,” I would put those nickels in a sock and do some serious violence. It’s probably a good thing I’m not paid in nickels.

The dictionary, your house nomenclature guide, and *Chicago* are invaluable here. Take the time to look things up. Preserve any wacky proprietary camelcase (e.g., “iPad”), even when the word comes at the beginning of a sentence. If opening a sentence with camelcase makes you uncomfortable, rewrite the sentence so that it doesn't start with a lowercase letter.



Case

There are two cases you need to worry about as a writer: title case and sentence case. Sentence case means you only capitalize the first letter of the first word and then all proper nouns. Title case means you capitalize every word except articles, conjunctions, and prepositions (yes, even long prepositions like “through” or “alongside”).

Where you use which one is always a house style issue. But be aware of it. I’m partial to sentence case myself, and tend to use it for everything but the main title of a work (and not even then for something like a blog post or a byline). I think it feels friendlier. Follow your own house style, but make sure that you're consistent with the case of subheads, section heads, captions, and so on.

Denotations and connotations

Words mean things. Specific things. Sometimes they mean *lots* of specific things. And since it's your job to convey meaning to the reader, you are responsible for knowing the meanings (all of them) of any word you choose, and for using it appropriately.

You may think you can get away with a word that means *approximately* what you want to say. "Oh well," you may tell yourself, "They know what I mean."

No, they don't. Do you know why they don't know what you mean? Because your words just told them that you meant something else.

Take care with your word choice. Invest the twenty extra seconds to look it up.

Parallelism

Whenever you have a list of things, every item in that list needs to be the same type of thing as all the others. If the first one is a noun, you've committed to listing nouns. If the first one is an imperative verb, then you're listing imperative verbs. And so on and so on.

I find that my copy usually feels best when all the items in a list have the exact same construction. Yes, I can use a gerund as a noun, but it's always stronger when they're either all gerunds or all non-gerund nouns. If I have an adjective-noun construction, I tend to stick with that.

bag of tricks

Know your parts of speech

- **Adjectives:** Words that describe nouns or pronouns, such as "small," "fun," or "blue."
- **Adverbs:** Words that describe verbs, clauses, adjectives, or adverbs, such as "quickly," "very," or "well."
- **Nouns:** You know the drill: "A noun is a person, place, or thing."
- **Prepositions:** When I was in elementary school, we learned that a preposition was "anywhere a cat can go." That covers things like "around," "through," and "underneath." "With," "for," and "to" may be a little less feline-friendly, but they are also common prepositions.
- **Gerunds:** A word that ends in *-ing* that acts like a noun. For example, "Copywriting is awesome!"
- **Imperative verbs:** Also known as the "command" form, the imperative is the copywriter's best friend. This is when the verb gives the reader a direct instruction, such as "Try it yourself!" or "Leave a comment below."

Punctuation

Imagine a world without punctuation. It would look something like this:

in recent years there has been a significant shift in how the average professional approaches gornswagling if you are concerned about your performance you should consider investing in floogblegorp which is the leader in the industry

Punctuation adds nuance and meaning to your copy — and you are, after all, in the business of using copy to convey meaning. You don't have to be a proofreader, but there are a few marks that every writer should know how to use correctly.

Ampersands

Don't use ampersands (“&”). You wouldn't write “UR” for “your” in professional writing. On your resume, you wouldn't list your objective as, “2 b the best writer EVAR.” When you use an ampersand, you look like the sort of person who would.

That said, there are times where space is limited, and then the ampersand is OK. This is a complete list of those times:

- Titles (e.g., movies, TV shows, books — NOT whitepapers or articles)
- Tweets or other limited-character social media (and even then, only when you're desperate for those two extra characters)
- Signs

Some would argue that the ampersand is also acceptable in ads. I would say those people need to learn how to spell, but you should consult your house style guide.



Colons

A colon comes after a complete sentence and introduces information that logically follows up on the first complete sentence. What comes after the colon can be a list, a fragment, a full sentence, whatever you want. But the bit before it must be a complete sentence.

The most common abuse of the colon looks like this:

My favorite things are: wine, cheese, and good company.

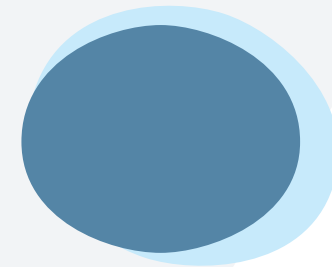
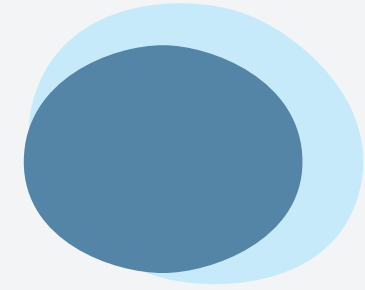


That's just terrible. "My favorite things are" is not a complete sentence. But if you need further proof that it's wrong, check this out:

My favorite things are wine, cheese, and good company.



I deleted the colon and I didn't lose any meaning. Any time you can delete something without losing meaning, you know it shouldn't have been there in the first place.



If you sent that sentence to a proofreader, about half the time they'd return a sentence that looked like this:

My favorite things are the following: wine, cheese, and good company.

That solves for the grammatical error of the sentence fragment, but it's a terrible, clunky sentence. When you get that kind of edit, it's time to admit to yourself that the original sentence probably wasn't much good either. It would have been much better if you had you taken the time to introduce the information in a more compelling way.

My life is full of many pleasures: wine, cheese, and good company for starters.



Colons can do so much more than introduce lists. They're brilliant for leading into examples:

»The Illiad tells of many heroes: Achilles, Hector, and Diomedes among them.

»Freud identified three components of the psychic apparatus: id, ego, and super-ego.

»Quarks come in six types, known as “flavors”: up, down, top, bottom, strange, and charm.

Or you can use them to introduce a speech:

GlorCo CEO Jane Sample raves about flooblecorp: “It’s the best thing I’ve ever tasted!”

Just be sure to use a complete sentence first, and you can find many uses for the colon.

Ellipses

The ellipsis (“...”) means that something has been left out. In a direct quote, it usually indicates an omission. In dialog or casual writing, it can represent a pause, a thought that trails off, or an eyebrow-waggling suggestive lead-in.

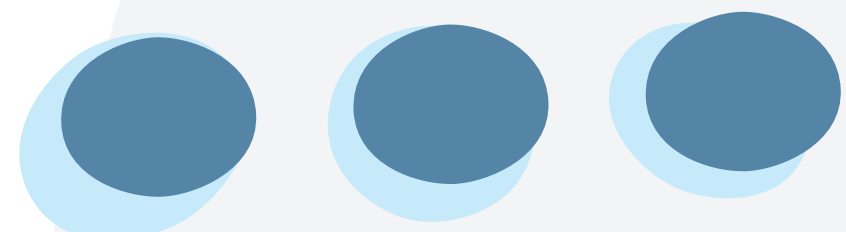
What it cannot do — ever, ever, ever — is link two or more sentences:

We should get together...is Tuesday good for you?...I should be ready by 2.



When I see things like that, I just...

What you do in text and social media in your personal time is up to you. But there are rules for punctuation in writing you've been paid to do. Even if the voice is casual, that use of the ellipsis is grammatically incorrect: it makes you and your organization look careless and sloppy.



Exclamation points

Don't use exclamation points ("!"). They make you sound excitable and unstable.

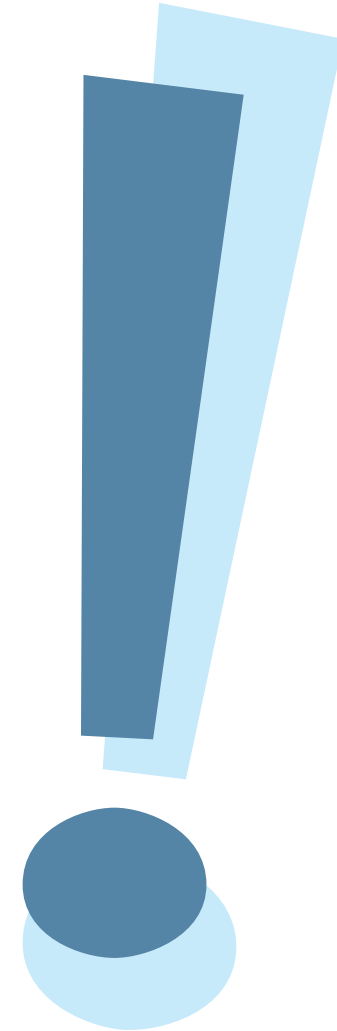
When you do use exclamation points (of course you do; we all do), use them sparingly and save them for the information that's actually exciting.

Extra-large khaki pants! 50% off!

I don't know what universe finds khaki pants that exciting, but it certainly isn't this one. The 50 percent off is arguably exciting, but the bigness of that 50 percent probably does a sufficient job of exciting the reader. You could easily delete both exclamation points:

Extra-large khaki pants: 50% off

If you feel like it's too dry, a good verb will do more than a whole sackful of punctuation:



Save 50% on extra-large khaki pants

You can even put the exclamation point back in now, if you really think the sale is that exciting.

Save 50% on extra-large khaki pants!

But whatever you do, don't double up on them:

Save 50% on extra-large khaki pants!!

Save 50% on extra-large khaki pants!!!

Save 50% on extra-large khaki pants!!!!!!!!!!!! 111!!!



Never. Ever.

Quotation marks

In the US, we use double quotation marks. This is not up to personal preference; single and double quotation marks are not interchangeable.

If you embed a direct quote inside another direct quote, then you use single quotation marks. Another quote inside that? More double. One quote deeper? Question your decision-making, but use single quotes again. And so on and so on.

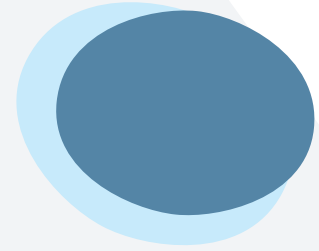


Semicolons

Semicolons differ from colons in two key ways: first, the bits on both sides of the semicolon must be complete sentences; second, where the colon has a sort of leading-in feeling, the semicolon simply tells you that the two ideas are related.

There are many opinions on semicolons; not all of them are correct.

Lots of grammarians and writing experts out there will tell you not to use semicolons. I'm not one of them. I love semicolons to tiny little bits, and I use them whenever I can get away with them.



Serial commas

The serial comma (AKA the Oxford comma) is, for some reason, one of the most contentious points in the wide world of grammar-scolding. But it isn't a question of right or wrong; it's a question of house style. As long as you're consistent, you are technically correct.

That said, I have a strong personal pro-serial comma preference. It just makes life easier, especially when a sentence backs you into a corner where ditching the serial comma would diminish meaning:

For dinner we ordered spaghetti and meatballs, strawberries and cream and gin and tonics.



Follow your house style first and personal preference second. But above all, make sure your comma placement makes sense to the reader.



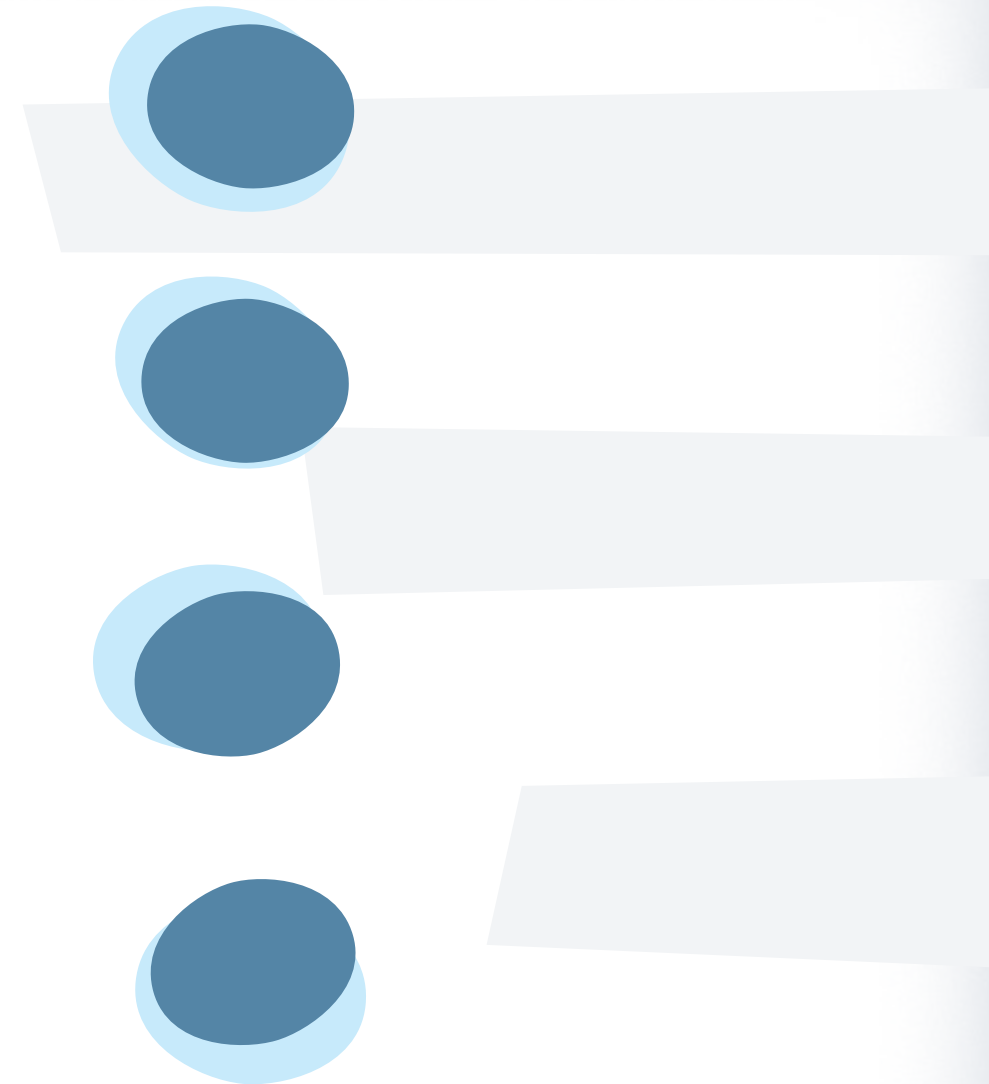
Unordered and ordered lists

Some of my most frustrating hours as a proofreader have been spent untangling bulleted lists that looked like they were thrown together by a drunk. If you've read straight through this book, you've already got the tools you need to do lists correctly. If not, go back and review the sections on parallelism and colons. I'll be here when you get back.

Ready? Good. This is pretty much all you need to know:

- All items in your list must have parallel construction
- If you plan on using a colon, you must introduce your list with a complete sentence

Once you can manage those two things, you're ready to write a list. If order is important, number the list. If not, use bullets (a numbered list where order doesn't matter is just confusing). If you only have two or three short things, forget the fancy formatting and leave them in a regular sentence.



In general, I prefer not to use terminal punctuation (like periods) at the end of single-sentence bullet points. If you do choose to use punctuation at the end your bullets, though, make sure you use it consistently.

Your house style (or *Chicago*, if you don't have a house style) might have some more detailed guidance around complicated scenarios, like when you're listing full sentences and some bullets have just one sentence while others have two or more. On the other hand, you're the writer: you have the power to turn those into non-issues.

And that's really the point: as long as you understand the basic principles of copywriting, it's in your power to do whatever you want. Once you know the rules, you'll know how to bend them, and you'll be able to recognize when to break them.

Now that you're armed with the tips in this guide, go out there and do some excellent copywriting.

summary

- Know the exact meanings (all of them) of the words you use
- In any series, make sure that all the items are the same part of speech
- Use punctuation to add meaning, and use it correctly
- When you introduce a bulleted or numbered list, use a full sentence before the colon and use parallel construction in the list itself
- Be consistent about where you use title case v. sentence case
- Only capitalize proper nouns, product names, and titles

further reading

- The *Elements of Style*, also known as Strunk and White, is THE essential text for professional writers. It's only 100 pages, but it will change your life.
- The *Chicago Manual of Style* is my Bible. In my starving student days, I would seek it out in bookstores and stroke its beautiful pages. Today I always have one copy on my desk at work and another next to my computer at home.
- The *AP Stylebook* should be part of any writer's library, especially those who write press releases or dabble in journalism.
- The *Yahoo! Style Guide* is a fantastic resource for anyone who writes web copy.
- The *Oxford Style Manual* covers British English, not US, but it's a great read nonetheless.

thank you

Thank you, reader, for downloading this book.

I really care about this stuff. There's something about the ability to communicate big, complicated ideas using nothing more than a page scattered with lines, curves, and dots that feels endlessly magical to me. I hope that I've managed to share some of that wonder with you; failing that, I hope you've at least learned some practical tips that you can use to advance your career. I wish you the very best of luck.

If you want to know more about me, look me up at carolesnitzer.com.