

09

Digital copywriting

In this chapter, you will learn:

- » The principles of writing for your web audience
- » Which types of web copy are available to you
- » The basics of HTML for formatting online text
- » How to write for search engine optimisation (SEO), focusing specifically on keywords
- » The best practices for successful online copywriting.

9.1 Introduction

Online copy is a hardworking multi-tasker. It must provide information to visitors, engage with them, convince them to take a desired action and, all the while, convey brand ethos. It also has to provide context and relevance to search engines. It needs to achieve all this without seeming as if the author is trying too hard to ensure a particular outcome.

You will see in this chapter that writing for digital is different from writing for more traditional media. Because of the sheer volume of information on the Internet, quality content is king. Many people argue that content is one of the most significant determinants of the success of your online campaigns. Considering it is one of the most direct lines of communication with your consumers, this is not surprising. Therefore, you will see many links between this chapter and the chapter on **Content marketing strategy**.

Online copywriting involves everything from the text on a website to the subject line of an email and all things in between. From PR articles of 800 words to four-line search adverts, if it's being read on a screen, no matter what the size of that screen, from desktop computer to mobile phone, it's online copy. Writing for digital does not mean the traditional rules of writing need to be abandoned. By and large, the foundations remain.

NOTE

Read more about this in the **Content marketing strategy** chapter.

9.2 Key terms and concepts

Term	Definition
Above the fold	The content that appears on a screen without a user having to scroll.
Active verb	A word that conveys action or behaviour and in a call to action, tells a reader what to do.
Audience	The group of people at which a marketing communication is targeted.
Benefit	The positive outcome for a user that a feature provides.
Call to action (CTA)	A phrase written to motivate the reader to take action, such as sign up for our newsletter or book car hire today.
Dynamic keyword insertion	In paid search advertising, this allows keywords used in searches to be inserted automatically into advert copy.
Feature	A prominent aspect of a product that is beneficial to users.
HyperText Markup Language (HTML)	Code used to structure the information and features within a web page.

Keyword stuffing	The process of intentionally putting too many keywords into the metadata of the website or using many irrelevant keywords. Search engines can penalise websites using this practice.
Mass customisation	Tailoring content for many individuals. Metadata information that can be entered about a web page and the elements on it in order to provide context and relevant information to search engines.
Persona	A character created to define a group of readers in order to speak to them as though they were a unique reader, creating the feeling of a one-on-one conversation.
Paid search advertising	Usually refers to advertising on search engines, sometimes called PPC advertising. The advertiser pays only for each click of the advert.
Sender alias	The name that is chosen to appear in the sender or 'from' field of an email.
Search engine optimisation (SEO)	The process of improving website rankings on search engine results pages.
Search engine results page (SERP)	The actual results returned to the user based on their search query.
Tone of voice	The register, formality and personality that comes through in the text.
Unique selling point (USP)	The aspect that makes your offering different from your competitors'.

Table 1.

9.3 Core principles

9.3.1 Writing for an audience

In marketing and advertising, knowing your audience is vital. It will guide you in developing your content strategy, determining the topics they are interested in and help you organise information in a way that makes sense to them. It will direct how you express your copy for your audience.

Step one of writing for digital is to ensure you have researched your audience and understand what they want. Once you have a clear idea about this, you can figure out how to fulfil those needs using your copy. *Smashing Magazine* (2015) recommends answering the following questions:

- Who are you writing for?
- What is the main message you want to get across?
- Where does the action take place (where will it be read)?
- When is it relevant?
- Why is it important (what's the goal)?

For example, your answers might look like this:

- Who: First-time moms
- Message: Our baby kit can help you
- Where: Parenting forums/magazines/social media
- When: Immediately before and after the birth of a child
- Why: Because first-time moms need help (and because we want them to buy our product).

When you are researching your audience, there are two useful concepts to bear in mind: the audience of one and personas.

9.3.2 The audience of one

According to Price and Price, audiences were traditionally thought of as a vast and vaguely defined crowd (Price & Price, 2002). Because the web provides a voice to individuals and niche groups, the concept of this mass audience is disintegrating.

Price and Price go on to argue that the Internet has led to an audience of one (Price & Price, 2002). What does this mean? While your audience is not literally one person (and if it is, thank your mum for reading your copy, but spend some time growing your readership), it is not a vast, vaguely defined crowd either. Instead, the web has many niche audiences who are used to being addressed as individuals. Indeed, The Economist Group (2015) confirms that personalised marketing is becoming more granular, helping to create specialised customer experiences that will keep them coming back.

The individual that you have in mind when you are writing could also be called a persona.

Take the time to think about **how** web and mobile content is consumed in the physical world. It's usually an exclusive action, so write your copy this way.

9.3.3 Personas

A persona is a profile that a writer creates to embody the characteristics of the target audience for whom he or she is writing.

Personas are based on the profile of readers of your copy. Creating a profile is all about considering the characteristics of your readers and their needs and desires. When you are building this profile there are a number of things that you should consider about your audience:

- Are they primarily male, female or a mixture?
- How old are they?
- What are their other demographics and psychographics?

Once you understand these simple characteristics, you can ask yourself some more in-depth questions. If you are selling something, questions could include:

- How do they make purchasing decisions?
- Do they compare many service providers before selecting one?
- Do they make lists of questions and call in for assistance with decision making, or do they make purchase decisions spontaneously based on a special offer?

Figure 1. A sample persona.

Understanding the profiles of your readers is an important process and the best copy usually results from extensive time spent figuring out your audience.

Tailoring your copy to your audience does not necessarily limit you to one persona.

Digital copy can be structured so that it caters for several personas. Consider that your various marketing channels may have different audiences, so ensure that you have a persona for each main platform you use. However, you need to spend time understanding their needs before you are able to write copy that addresses these personas.

9.3.4 Types of web copy

Whether it is long or short, the purpose of content is to communicate a message. Communication implies that the message has been both received and understood. The considerations covered here are aimed at ensuring that when you distribute a message, it is communicated effectively to the people whom you want to receive it.

To communicate the intended message effectively, content needs to be:

- Clear and concise
- Easy to read
- Well-written
- Well-structured.

Content written for the web can be divided into two broad categories, short copy and long copy. The division is by no means scientific.

Short copy

On the web, writers often have very little time and space to get a message across to a visitor and to entice them to take action. This is especially true of banner and search adverts but is also important across all digital marketing disciplines. Probably the most important short copy anywhere is the call to action.

Call to action

Users scan web pages and look for clues on what to do. Tell them. A call to action is a short, descriptive instruction that explicitly tells a reader what to do, for example, 'Click here' or, 'Buy this now'. Any time there is an action you want a reader to take, a call to action should instruct them on what to do. This means using active verbs when you write and crafting hyperlinks to be clear instructions that resonate with your visitors at each step in the conversion process.

Also, know where to place your call to action so that it makes sense to a reader's eye. For example, depending on the structure of your page, it might be better to start with your call to action and then to qualify it. In other cases, ending the page with your call to action may have a stronger impact on the reader as they may be more likely to act once they have the information they need to do so. This depends on your product and the action you want your audience to take.

Banner advertising involves clear calls to action and they can also be used in social media posts, search adverts, content marketing and more. Call to action copy is not limited to short copy. Email newsletters and promotions should also make use of calls to action and we even see them all over web pages. Each piece of online copy should be written with a CTA or at least with the question, "What's next?" in mind.

	Basic	Premium <small>Best Value</small>
Average monthly cost after free trial ends	From \$19.99	From \$29.99
Unlimited learning from all 5,062 courses	✓	✓
Watch on your computer, phone, tablet or TV	✓	✓
Cancel anytime and first 10 days are free	✓	✓
Project files and code practice	✗	✓
Assess your progress with quizzes	✗	✓
Offline viewing	✗	✓

[Continue](#)

Figure 2. CTAs should be clear and enticing.

A good call to action resonates with the action the users need to take, as opposed to the technical function that is performed. For example, if a user has entered an email address to sign up to your email newsletter, the action button should say 'Sign up' and not 'Submit'. Make sure you write your instructions for humans. Think about what real people prefer to read!

Also consider what actions mean offline. For an email newsletter, 'Sign up' can have very different connotations from 'Subscribe'. Furthermore, 'Subscribe' is very different from 'Subscribe for free'.

Whereas subscriptions have connotations of costs, 'Sign up' does not carry the same burden. However, 'Subscribe for free' could imply greater value as something that would normally carry a cost is available to you for free.

NOTE
Since the call to action is key to converting customers, this is an important element to test. What iterations of your main call to action could you try?

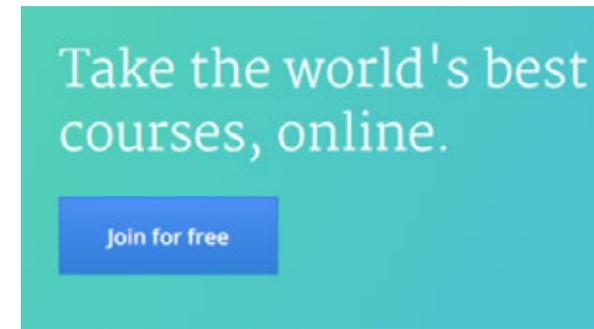


Figure 3. A Coursera CTA. Good CTAs are short and to the point.

Titles and subject lines

Titles and subject lines often form part of a body of long copy. However, they are important enough to be discussed as stand-alone short copy. Titles and subject lines are there for a very important reason: they tell a reader whether or not they should read further. They are the gateway to your content.

Consider the following titles:

- Guide to online copywriting
- Ten steps to online copywriting that sells.

NOTE
The *Huffington Post* is well known for publishing articles with compelling headlines. Visit www.huffingtonpost.com to have a look at how they grab the reader's attention.

The second title conveys more information and excitement to the reader, which helps the reader to make a decision to read further.

Subject lines are like headlines for emails and can make the difference between an email being deleted instantly and being opened and read. As with a headline, which should be carefully crafted like the headline of a newspaper, use the subject line to make it clear what the email is about. For example, if there is a promotion in the email, consider putting it in the subject line as well.

NOTE
An email subject line is the first cue your audience receives to help them decide whether to open an email or not. How can you make it count?

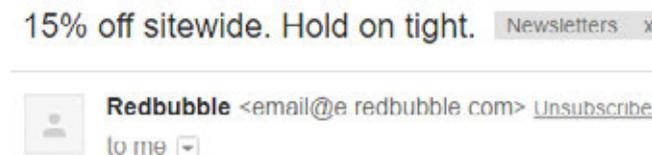


Figure 4. A direct, enticing email subject line.

Titles, headlines and subject lines need to be both persuasive and enticing. Consider what need your copy is meeting for your readers and express that first. Highlighting

a benefit to your readers upfront means they are more likely to engage, even if they don't necessarily need your product or service at the time.

Search adverts

Search adverts have very limited space and time to get a message across, and there is plenty of competition for a reader's attention. These few lines of copy need to work hard to ensure a top return on investment.

Search adverts typically follow the same basic structure and have strict character limits for each line. The new Google expanded ads are as follows:

NOTE

Read more about this in the **Search advertising** chapter.

Heading 1 – Heading 2 (max. 30 characters each)

One description field (max. 80 characters)

[www.DisplayURL.com](#) (uses your final URL's domain with two optional 'path' fields max. 15 characters each).

With a limited character count, it can seem daunting to communicate information that entices the right people to click through and also differentiates you from your competition. Testing variations of copy is the best way to determine what works best for your campaign. While copywriters are not generally responsible for writing paid search ads, they are often brand custodians and should review all copy representing a brand.

Social copy

Social media allows brands to have conversations with their customers and fans. This gives consumers a powerful voice and the ability to tell brands what they want. There are a few considerations to keep in mind when creating content for social media:

- **Research is vital.** Understand what type of content community members want. Meaningful and relevant content is more likely to be shared. Hashtags are fairly important for many platforms so research any hashtags you use to avoid making costly mistakes, like DiGiorno did with its use of the #WhyIStayed hashtag. This hashtag was part of an awareness campaign for domestic abuse and was used in tweets explaining why users had chosen to stay in abusive relationships.

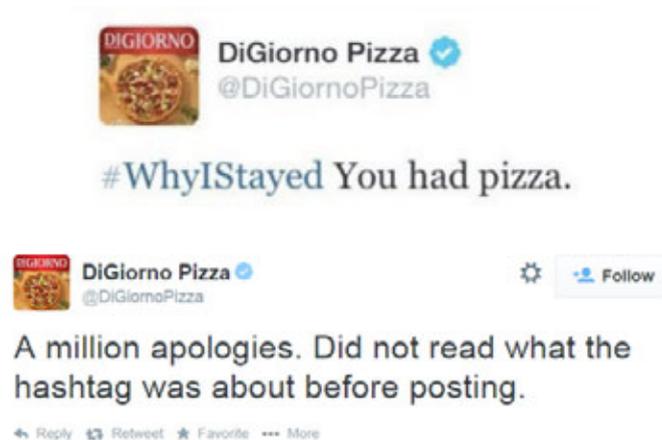


Figure 5. DiGiorno research fail.

- **Remember that it's a conversation.** Your content must be personable and appealing. Use personality and convey the humanity of your brand in order to generate conversation and encourage comments.
- **Write shareable content.** Offer value and be insightful. Ultimately you should aim to create an overall perception that your brand is the thought leader in its industry. Shareable content is credible content.
- **Avoid overly promotional content.** Community members are likely to see right through a sales pitch. Instead, think about how your content can be useful to your reader. Remember, with content, value to the reader should come first, with value to the brand as a secondary consideration.
- **Have a solid communication protocol.** These can be internal guidelines for organisations to follow on how they use and communicate on social media platforms. This also ensures consistency, which is very important for creating a brand personality for readers to engage with.



Figure 6. Relevant and on-brand social media copy.

Long copy

Online copywriting is not just about short, sharp calls to action and attention-grabbing headlines and adverts. It also covers longer pieces of content.

Longer copy has advantages. Primarily, it allows you to provide more information and encourage the reader to convert. You can foster a relationship with a reader, whether it is on a blog, through email communications, or through articles and news releases. With more words and space available, you are able to build a voice and a personality into your writing.

The expression 'long copy' is somewhat misleading. As online readers behave slightly differently from offline readers, it is unlikely that a skilled copywriter will be called on to create copy for the web that is longer than 800 or 1 000 words per page although, of course, there are exceptions to this.

NOTE

All of these points are covered in more detail in the chapters on **Social media platforms** and **Social media strategy**.

Long copy needs to be structured and formatted so that it's easy for attention-starved web readers to digest. Web users tend to scan pages quickly to determine whether or not they will read further. Specifically in longer copy, you need to take this into consideration.

There are many types of long online copy including website copy! Here, we will focus on a few that are useful for marketing:

- News releases
- Articles for online syndication
- Emails
- Blog posts
- Advertorials
- Website.

Bear in mind that this is by no means an exhaustive list.

News releases

News releases are a staple of public relations. As the Internet grows, so does the overlap between PR and marketing. As a result, many copywriters are called upon to write news releases for online distribution as this is a standardised format for releasing information. Originally intended to provide information for journalists, news releases are increasingly being read by users bypassing the journalists. This means that they should be written in the brand tone, be accessible to the general public and be optimised and formatted according to the principles of good web writing (more on those later). Also remember to focus on a compelling headline to win over your reader.



Figure 7. An online press release from Apple.

Emails

Email as a channel is an integral part of many online marketing strategies. Of course, content is a huge part of this; it comprises the words in an email with which a user engages.

By nature, emails are the ideal medium for communicating and building relationships with your consumers. This customer relationship marketing helps to increase retention. Successful email campaigns provide value to their readers. This value may vary from campaign to campaign. Newsletters can offer:

- Humour and entertainment
- Research and insight
- Information and advice
- Promotions and special offers.

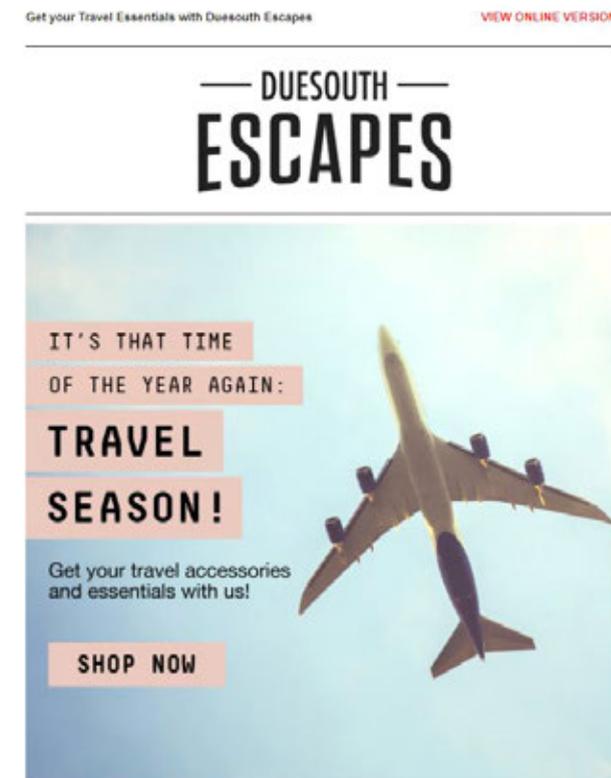


Figure 8. The Due South Escapes newsletter.

Blogging

Blogs can be very successful marketing tools. They're an excellent way to communicate with staff, investors, industry members, journalists and prospective customers. Blogging also helps to foster a community around a brand and provides an opportunity to garner immediate feedback. This is an audience made up of players vital to the success of a company which is why it is important to get blogging right. A key consideration is the quality of your headlines. You have to convince your reader to grant you their attention.

NOTE

Read more about this in the **Direct marketing email and mobile** chapter.



Figure 9. A blog post on the Fast Company blog.

There is plenty to be gained from the process of blogging and obviously, the value, as with email marketing, lies in the content. This communication channel provides an opportunity for you to foster an online identity for your brand, as well as giving your company a voice and a personality. This happens through the content you distribute as well as the tone you use to converse with your readers. There is more information on blogging in the chapter on **Social media platforms**.

9.3.5 Website copy

Website copy is a type of long copy and the principles that apply to long copy in general also hold true for websites. Digital copywriters need to structure content effectively so that users want to engage with the site and read on. This is especially important when people access a site from their mobile phone, where the small screen size drastically reduces the content users will see before they scroll. Some ways to create digital copy that is usable and appropriate for an online audience include:

- Writing text that can be easily scanned
- Using meaningful headings and sub-headings
- Highlighting or bolding key phrases and words
- Using bulleted lists
- Having a well-organised site.
- **Limiting each paragraph to one main idea or topic.** The leading sentence should give a clear indication of what the paragraph is about. Readers can scan each paragraph without missing any essential information.
- **Cutting the fluff.** Get rid of meaningless turns of phrase and words that unnecessarily bulk up copy.

- **Removing redundancies.** These often creep into writing by accident, but you should work to eliminate them in order to get to the point.
- **Including multimedia wherever relevant.** Some readers may be more partial to video than reading, for example, see www.nytimes.com/projects/2012/snow-fall/#/?part=tunnel-creek.

9.3.6 Writing in the mobile age

Because of the number of people who use the internet via mobile phones, content is usually written for mobile first these days. Here are some points on creating digital copy for all screen sizes that encourages interaction and achieves marketing and business goals:

- **Get to the point.** With limited screen space, there really is no room for wordy text. You need to determine exactly what your message is and get to the point quickly! This is particularly true for content above the fold.
- **Put the important bits up front.** This includes contact information and navigation links. Word these clearly so that people know what action to take.
- **Condense information to its simplest form.** Ensure that it still makes sense and is grammatically sound.
- **Use a call to action upfront.** Mobile web users are goal-orientated so provide them with the next step early on.
- **Use headings and subheadings for scanning.**

NOTE

Read more about this in the **Mobile channels and apps** chapter.

NOTE

Once users have decided to navigate further into your mobile website, you can increase the amount of copy on the pages.

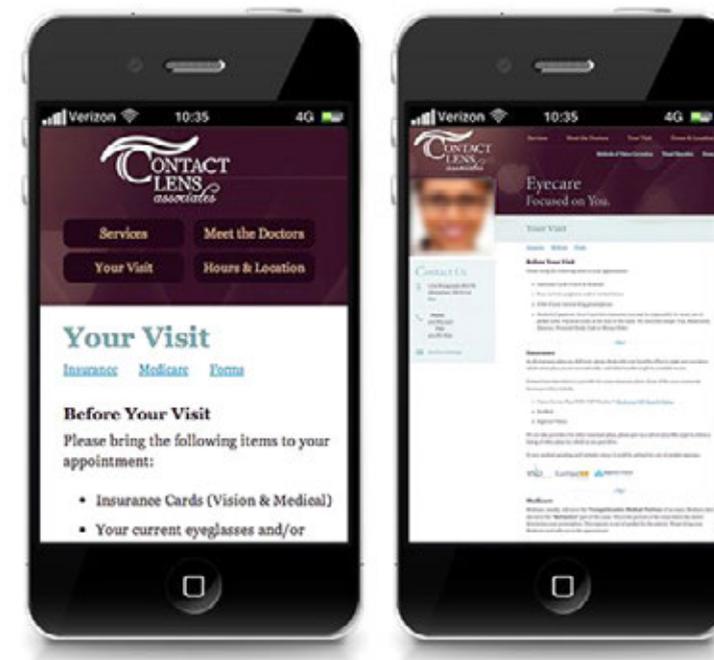


Figure 10. Mobile-optimised copy vs. traditional web copy.

9.4. Implementing writing for digital

Apart from the information already covered, writing good copy involves a number of points and best practices that you should keep in mind.

9.4.1 HTML for formatting

HTML stands for HyperText Markup Language and it's the foundation of documents on the web. HTML tags tell browsers how to present content. HTML tags are written in brackets that look like arrows < >.

A good digital copywriter will also be able to use basic HTML to lay out copy knowing that the appearance of the page will get his or her words read. It should be easy for users to skip and skim the copy, and it should be easy for them to find the parts that are most relevant to them.

When writing online copy you can use an HTML editor where you insert the tags yourself or, a 'What You See Is What You Get' (WYSIWYG) editor, which works in a similar way to a word processor.

Basic HTML is not difficult to use and will help you format your content. Here are some basic HTML tags:

To bold: phrase you want to bold

To italicise: <i>phrase you want to italicise</i>

To underline: <u>phrase you want to underline</u>

To list: lines you want to list

To create a paragraph: <p>paragraph text</p>

To insert a line break:

To insert a link: phrase you want to link

To insert a heading: <h1>Level one heading</h1>

To insert a sub-heading: <h2>Level two heading</h2>

NOTE

Right click on any web page and click 'view source'. Can you find the paragraph tag <p>?

The tags also help search engines to identify how the content has been laid out on the page.

The best way to get to grips with HTML is to start using it online, where you can see first-hand how the tags work.

9.4.2 SEO copywriting

A good online copywriter will have a thorough understanding of SEO and how this can be integrated into his or her writing. Key phrases can be used in long and short copy alike, to great effect.

Optimising for human and machine users

NOTE

Read more about this in the **Search engine optimisation (SEO)** chapter.

One of the most notable differences between writing for print and writing for digital is that when it comes to the latter, you are writing not only for an audience, but also for the search engines. While your human audience should always be your first priority, your copy also needs to speak to the search engines in a language they can understand. This digital tactic has been covered in greater depth in the chapter

on **Search engine optimisation (SEO)**. Optimising your copy for search engines is important because your target audience is most likely to be using a search engine to find the products or services you are offering. If the search engine is not aware that your content can give users the answers they are looking for on a particular subject, it won't send traffic to your website.

Optimising your content for search is the process of telling search engines what content you are publishing. Keywords, key phrases and themed pages are an integral part of this. Google is becoming increasingly semantically aware and can recognise synonyms, so repeatedly using specific keywords is no longer important; instead, good SEO copy focuses a page around particular themes, using keywords relevant to those themes.

SEO copywriters need to know how to blend keywords into their content and how to use them in conjunction with text formatting and metadata. In addition to assisting you with structuring your content, these tags indicate relevance and context to search engines. Some of the tags are used by screen readers and so they assist visitors with technical limitations to access your content. The meta description can also be used by search engines on the search engine results pages (SERPs).

Key phrase

A keyword refers to a single word used in a search query, while a key phrase refers to more than one word used in the search query.

Key phrase research is an important element of digital copywriting and is covered in detail in the chapter on SEO. Having identified the themes of your web pages, keyword research should be used to identify what phrases your target audience uses when searching for you. It is important to know what people are searching for, so that you can provide what they need.

Once you have a good idea of the words people are using to find information online (online tools exist that will guide you in this), you can create pages themed around the use of these phrases and their synonyms. A good copywriter is able to create these themed pages and use keywords/synonyms seamlessly, so that the reader cannot detect that they have been included.

Key phrases can be integrated into nearly every type of content that you write for the web. Below are a few places where Red & Yellow tend to include key phrases and synonyms on our website.

Page title

The page title appears at the top of a user's browser and should be able to tell the user (and the search engine spiders, of course) what the main theme of the page is. The page title is usually limited to under 60 characters, including spaces. The key phrase should be used as close to the beginning of the title as possible, followed by the name of the company or website.

Page URL

The main key phrase for the page should be used whenever possible in the URL for the page. If you are using a blogging tool or content management system (CMS), the URL is generated from the page title, so using the key phrase in the page title should ensure that it is in the URL as well.



Figure 11. The Red & Yellow School home page URL.

NOTE

Read more about this in the **Search engine optimisation** chapter.

NOTE

Every page on a website must have a unique URL, page title and meta description.

Meta description

The meta description is a short paragraph describing the page content. This summary is usually shown on the SERPs if it contains the search term, which means that it needs to entice users to click through with a strong CTA. The spiders use the meta description to deduce the topic of the page, so using targeted key phrases is important here. Copy should generally be between 150 and 160 characters, including spaces.

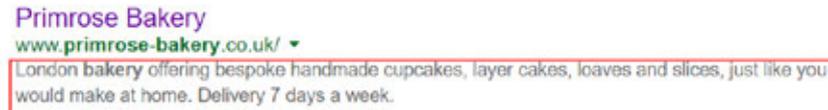


Figure 12. Example of a meta description.

Meta keywords

Meta keywords are the list of the words and phrases that are important on a web page. Using targeted key phrases is important, but remember, no keyword stuffing! The meta keywords are limited to 200 characters, including spaces. This is, however, no longer a major source of information used by search engines though it certainly doesn't hurt to include these.

Headings and sub-headings

Spiders assign more relevance to the text used in headings, so it is important to use your key phrases in the headings on your page. It also helps you to structure your content. Headings are created with HTML tags.

Heading structures are set out like this:

<h1> Main page headings

<h2> Sub-headings

<h3> Information under the sub-headings

Figure 13. Heading structures.

Having a good heading hierarchy is important as spiders use it to move through your page and understand its relevance to the search query; it also helps human readers to scan your page.

On-page copy

For on-page copy, remember that you will be optimising for a theme rather than for a set key phrase. This means you want to use relevant synonyms as well as your keywords without being overt about it meaning they should not stand out too much.

For SEO effectiveness, a page of web copy should be at least 250 words long. On this page, use keywords and synonyms that fit the theme as and when required.

The page should not be so long that the user needs to scroll continuously to get to the end of it. If you find the page is getting exceptionally long, consider breaking it into different web pages for different sections. In this way, you could add several pages of optimised copy focused on one theme instead of one very long page. This will benefit your reader if they are looking for something that is particular to the shorter page.

Links to your optimised page

The text used to link from one page to another is considered important by search engine spiders, so try to ensure that your key phrase is used when linking to the optimised page. The anchor text of links should include the key phrase of the page being linked to and not the page being linked from.

Before you begin

If you're not familiar with the components of Quality Score, consider reviewing [About Quality Score](#) before you get started.

Instructions

Choose the AdWords experience you're using. [Learn more](#) ES.

Figure 14. Links on a Google Support page dealing with Google Quality Score.

Images: Alt text and title tags

Alt text refers to the 'alt' attribute for the HTML tag; this is the text that appears in the caption. It is used in HTML to attribute text to an image on a web page, normally to describe what an image is about and display text in instances where the image is unable to load. While this is handy for humans and aids accessibility, it is also used for another reason, namely, search engine spiders can't read images, but they can read the alt text. The image title tag shows when you hover with your mouse over an image, depending on your browser and can also be read by the search engine spider. This will also help users find your images on Google's Image Search, which can also be helpful in driving traffic to your page.

9.4.3 Best practices for online copywriting

Now that we have covered the basic theoretical principles of writing for digital, we need to look at the best practices to apply whenever you are writing copy for publication on the web. There are several things that you need to consider:

1. Does your copy convey a creative idea?
2. Does the layout of your copy make it easier to read?
3. Is your meaning clear and direct?
4. Does the copy convey the features and benefits necessary to make your point (if applicable)?
5. Will your readers clearly understand the content of your writing?
6. Is the content of your message structured in a logical manner for desktop and/or mobile reading?

The rest of this chapter will be dedicated to ensuring that you have the knowledge and tools to answer these questions.

Conceptual copywriting

Most of the points in this chapter have focused on the practicalities of writing online copy such as getting information across and encouraging user actions and engagement.

Copy should also be creative, beautiful and thought provoking.

NOTE

When submitting promotional copy to other sites that includes links back to your own website, which phrases would be most important to include in this link text?

Your copy should express an idea that grips readers. Conceptual copywriting is about making an idea memorable merely by using words to express it. The idea is central and the words are the vehicles that convey it. Clever wording, smart ideas and thoughtful copy should make the reader pause, think and want to engage more deeply with your idea.

While images are often used to express powerful ideas, words can be just as effective. Consider this famous example, which demonstrates how a small change in the copy can radically affect one's perception of an idea:

A woman without her man is nothing.

A woman: without her, man is nothing.

Writing conceptually means conveying a brand message in a creative way to make an emotive connection with a specific audience. It's all about bringing a big idea or concept to life.

Layout and legibility

As we have mentioned already, readers process content differently online from the way that they read offline. On the web, readers tend to scan text rather than read every word.

As a result, online copy is judged at a glance, not just on content, but first and foremost by its layout. It needs to look as if it's easy to read before a user will choose to read it.

Digital copy should be easy to scan. This means using:

- Clear and concise headings
- Bulleted and numbered lists
- Short paragraphs
- Bold and italics
- Descriptive links.

It's easy to see this in practice.

Before	After
Tea has been drunk for thousands of years and as people are growing more health conscious, tea sales are increasing. Personal preference plays an important role in making the perfect cup of tea. However, using fresh water ensures maximum oxygen in the tea and warming the teapot first is standard practice. Tradition dictates one teabag per person and one for the pot. Tea is served with milk, lemon, honey or sugar, according to taste.	Worldwide, tea sales are increasing as people are becoming more health conscious. Here are some tips on making the perfect cup of tea : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use fresh water (for maximum oxygen) • Warm the teapot first • Use one teabag per person and one for the pot The perfect cup of tea is based on personal preference and taste . Tea can be served with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Milk or lemon • Honey or sugar

Language

The basic principles of good writing apply online, but because your audience's attention is limited and often divided, it is best to keep it simple and tailor your language to your audience.

Tone: The tone of your content should be consistent with the brand for which you are writing. Brands will often have full tone-of-voice documentation. If they don't, read some of the brand material to get a feel for the company's style of communication. Compare the difference in tone in the examples below.

Example of Tone A: Investec

We provide a diverse range of financial products and services to a niche client base in three principal markets, the United Kingdom, South Africa and Australia, as well as certain other geographies.

Investec's strategic goals are motivated by the desire to develop an efficient and integrated business on an international scale through the active pursuit of clearly established core competencies in the group's principal business areas (Investec, 2016).

Example of Tone B: Nando's

The story of Nando's starts hundreds of years ago with the first Portuguese explorers who set sail for the East in search of the legendary spice route.

Lured by the promises of our beautiful continent, they came ashore and there, under our famous sun, they discovered the African Bird's Eye Chilli or as we know it (and love it), PERi-PERi. Unique in its properties, they used it to create a one-of-a-kind sauce that ignited the fires of passion inside them.

A few centuries later, in 1987, it was the same PERi-PERi sauce that inspired Fernando Duarte to invite his buddy Robbie Brozin to a small Portuguese eatery in Rosettenville, South Africa, to try some PERi-PERi marinated chicken. In his own words, "I knew nothing about the food business, I just knew that it was the best chicken I had ever tasted" (Nando's, 2016).

Active voice: Grammatically speaking, people expect characters to execute actions that have an impact on objects or other characters.

For example: The girl ate a chocolate.

- The girl is the subject.
- Eating is the action.
- The chocolate is the object that is affected by the action.

This is known as the active voice. Unfortunately, writers often use the passive voice. This turns the object into the subject forcing the reader to think more carefully about the sentence. For example: The chocolate was eaten by the girl. The human brain automatically translates this into the format that it expects. According to Price and Price, this adds 25% to the time required to understand a sentence (Price & Price, 2002).

When writing for the web, it is better to use the active voice.

Neologisms and buzzwords: Sometimes the World Wide Web is referred to as the Wild Wild Web as it is an environment where anything goes. The ever-growing numbers of social media participants, for example, habitually play fast and loose with grammar.

With new services and products being developed daily, it can feel as if the list of new words and their uses, is growing faster than you can keep up with. Dictionaries and reference guides celebrate this regularly with a 'word of the year', usually one that has been in heavy use on the Internet for the three years preceding its entry into a dictionary.

For example, in 2015, the laughing emoji was voted word of the year by the editors of the New Oxford American dictionary to reflect the worldwide increase in popularity of the emoji (Oxford Dictionaries, 2015).



Figure 15. The Oxford Dictionaries Word of the Year, 2015.

Online services can quickly become verbs in everyday language, so we say 'Googling something' instead of 'searching on Google' and of 'Facebooking someone'. Bing is still trying desperately to work its way into everyday conversation in this way.

Always remember you are writing for your users so talk in the same way that they talk. If your content is aimed at cutting-edge early adopters, then pepper it with the latest buzzwords. If your audience does not know the difference between Chrome, Safari and Microsoft Edge, then be cautious when using a word that did not exist the day before.

Features and benefits: Writing compelling copy means conveying to readers why they should perform an action. While features may seem all-important, you need to communicate the benefits of the features to the user.

You also need to communicate the benefits in a way that makes the user think about the product's role in their life. Write so that they imagine actually owning the product:

- **Feature:** a prominent aspect of a product or service that can provide benefits to users. It describes what the product does.
- **Benefit:** the positive outcome for a user that a feature provides. It can be the emotional component of what the user gets out of the product.

Why would your audience want to buy your product or service? Put aside the features for a moment; what will compel your audience to buy on an emotional level? How does it address their wants and needs?

For example, consider a home entertainment system. Features could include surround sound and a large flat-screen television. The benefit is a cinema-quality experience in your own home.

Features and benefits are very different. Features are important to the company that provides the product or service. Benefits are important to those who decide to use the product or service.

Persuasive writing makes use of features, benefits and active verbs to create appealing messages for your personas:

Enjoy cinema-quality movie nights in your own home with a surround-sound home entertainment system.

Logic

The structure of online copy can be compared closely to the structure of a newspaper article. The headline, usually containing the most important bit of information in a story, comes first. Online, visitors decide quickly whether or not to read a page. As a result of this, the most important information needs to be at the top.

Start with the summary or conclusion which is the main idea of the article.

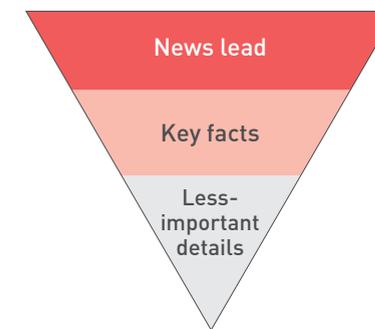


Figure 16. Information hierarchy.

While clever word play in headings can attract some attention, these need to be written in line with the objective you want to achieve. The copy is multitasking; not only is it informing visitors of what to expect, it is also telling search engine spiders what the page is about.

9.5 Advantages & challenges

The advantages of good digital copywriting are simple, your content will work better, your SEO will benefit and your customers will find it easier to absorb your material. Clear call to actions can also help to increase response rates.

However, some challenges do exist. The primary challenge is learning what, exactly, good copy is. This is important because bad copy can really turn off your customer! Meeting SEO requirements without being spammy can be tricky and you need a clear set of writing guidelines for your organisation to follow.

9.6 Measuring Success

Measuring copywriting performance is important. How will you know what's working and what isn't unless you do so?

Often, brands use conversions as the primary way to measure success. If your copy doesn't convert, what's the point? The goals that you measure will depend on the goals of your copy. If you want to boost subscribers to your newsletter or blog, then the number of subscribers will be your measure of success. If you want to increase sales, then the number of sales will be your measure. Because digital copywriting

applies to almost every aspect of digital marketing, you can only measure its success if you have a clear idea of your goals.

However, copy isn't always just about converting. You can also use impressions, time on page and bounce rate to see whether your copy is keeping people interested and on-site.

9.7 Tools of the trade

The Simple Measure of Gobbledygook (SMOG) formula from Harry McLaughlin can be used to calculate the reading level of copy that you have written. A SMOG calculator and instructions for use, can be found on here: www.readabilityformulas.com/free-readability-formula-tests.php

Alternatively, www.flesh.sourceforge.net offers a Java application that produces the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level and the Flesch Reading Ease Score of a document.

For an online dictionary and an online thesaurus, you can visit www.dictionary.com and www.thesaurus.com.

NOTE

Read more about this in the [Search engine optimisation \(SEO\)](#) chapter.

When it comes to keyword research, there are a host of tools available. Have a look at the tools suggested in the chapter on SEO. Grammarly is a good one - www.grammarly.com.

9.8 Case study: Yelp

9.8.1 One-line summary

A Yelp salesperson tripled her B2B email marketing response rate by personalising and humanising email copy.

9.8.2 The challenge

Yelp's sales email templates were dry and unengaging, not considering the audience to whom they were writing and included no consideration of features vs. benefits. This caused a disconnect between the brand and its audience. The emails made the salesforce sound, "Like a bunch of robots... with no personality" (Medhora, 2015)

9.8.3 The solution

One Yelp salesperson tested a number of more personalised emails and came up with a formula that increased response rates considerably. She focused on showing that she was a real person and on building a sense of urgency and her formula looked like this:

Feature + Benefit + Value + Human Factor = Email more likely to earn a response

So, for example, for the feature, she would link to a business's Yelp pages. The benefit would be a description of how the business can grow through Yelp. The value would be indicating how many leads the business had found through Yelp and the human factor involved casual subject lines and use of emojis. The subject line for the email below was "Re: Yelp Email Per Your Request - A Response Would Be Appreciated 😊".

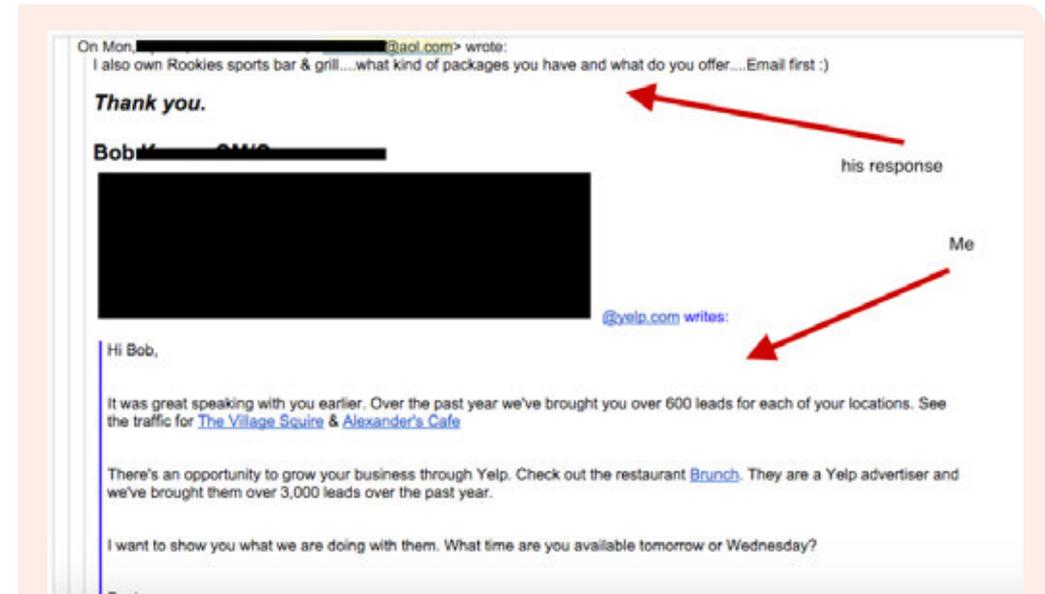


Figure 17. A personalised Yelp email and its response.

The salesperson ran a few experiments to measure the success rates of personalised emails against Yelp template emails, added some important factors to consider – how the copy attracted attention, ignited interest and desire and encouraged action – and then made sure that the email was interesting as well. She also tested a number of headlines, or subject lines, to see which had the best response rates.

9.8.4 The results

- Her response rate rose from 3.33% to 11.43% (even if some of the responses were negative!).
- She learned some important lessons about how personalising your copy, thinking about features vs. benefits and writing for an audience of one can improve responses!

9.9 The bigger picture

It should be pretty clear by now that online copy touches every other digital marketing tactic. After all, they all need to communicate messages in text format, whether that's a CTA button on a website, a video description, or a long-form press release written for digital PR purposes. While content marketing strategy may tell you what content to create, knowing how to create it comes down to great web writing skills.

Writing for digital overlaps strongly with SEO and UX. Because search engines can't read images, videos or other rich media, they rely on copy to index the content. Having content that is optimised for search engines is crucial for SEO. Once users have been directed to your site, it is necessary that the copy on the site meets user needs ensuring good UX.

9.10 Chapter summary

Online copy is the foundation of a website. It is constantly in view and is usually the focal point of a page. Good online copy can also make the difference between a site attracting regular traffic and becoming stagnant.

Your writing needs first and foremost to have the reader in mind. The copy should be strong, clear and easily readable (remember the principles of scannability, including bullet points, bolding, short paragraphs and headings), while still making maximum use of key phrases.

9.11 Case study questions

1. Why would bad copy in emails prevent users from signing up with Yelp, which aims to help businesses grow?
2. Why do you think the more targeted copy performed better than the more generic copy?
3. Identify the writing for digital principles (including audience considerations) that improved the response rate for the Yelp emails.

9.12 Chapter questions

1. Why is important to write for an 'audience of one'?
2. Why should users dictate your content? List some ways that users' needs determine content.
3. What are some ways to make web copy easy to read and why is it important to do so?
4. For some real online copywriting practice, choose an article in a magazine or newspaper and rewrite it for an Internet audience.

9.13 Further reading

Web Writing That Works is an easy-to-read and thorough resource. The website for the book is www.webwritingthatworks.com.

Another excellent resource is *The Idea Writers: Copywriting in a New Media and Marketing Era* (www.palgrave.com/gp/book/9780230613881)

www.copyblogger.com has regular articles and case studies on writing online copy that converts.

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9.15 Figure acknowledgments

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