

# Guide to Killer Online Copywriting

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## Introduction

Web site copy creates the "voice" of a company, just as the look and feel of a site put a "face" on the company and on otherwise intangible products and services. On an e-commerce site, the copy plays a key role in closing sales as well as in upselling and cross-selling products and services. Good copy delights first-time visitors, encourages return visits and propels both customer acquisition and retention.

Killer copywriting for the Web is similar to good journalistic writing. It is clear and to the point; it tells you what you need to know up front; and it is easy to read. Above all, it is direct-marketing copy. The goal of any web page should be to get the visitor to DO something: to move on to the next step in a purchase sequence or to click for more information about a product or service. Without readable, compelling copy and clearly organized hypertext links, visitors are much less likely to complete a transaction – and return to the site again.



**Web site copy creates the "voice" of a company; the look and feel of a site are the "face."**

Although there are no hard and fast rules for effective writing for the Web, there are some general guidelines that can be useful. We've organized them from two perspectives, reading on the Web and writing for the Web. We hope this guide proves that killer copy on a Web site can be part of a powerful direct marketing strategy whether it's B2B or B2C.

## Reading on the Web

People read a Web page differently than they do a brochure or a newspaper. They scan, scroll, click, hit the back button, hit the forward button "Reading" is about moving around and being in control. It's the fun of hypertext navigation. Web site visitors are more serious and purposeful than they were two or three years ago, but they still want to have a little fun – as well as accomplish something (make a purchase, find information).

### Home Page

You have one chance to make a first impression – to quickly convey the benefit of staying on your Web site. We can't overstate the importance of first impressions, which in Web-time are measured in milliseconds. The layout, functionality, message and overall look and feel of a home page determine who stays – and who clicks away. A copywriter should ask her/himself,



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"Am I communicating what is compelling about this company on the home page? Do I convey the benefits (features can come later)? Are my headlines meaningful? Does the visitor know what to do next?"



## Layout

Don't think page turning; think scrolling and hypertext navigation. Use shorter sentences, bullet points and other visual devices such as a chart or matrix. Grab a visitor's attention with the first phrase or first sentence of a page. Think high impact direct-marketing copy. Always keep in mind that many Web users scan rather than read.

## Writing For The Web: A Goal For Each Page

Writing for the Web should always start from the reader's perspective. What is the Web site visitor looking for? Why is she there? How can we make her visit as quick and efficient and positive as possible. The copywriter should take the time to clarify the goal of each page before starting to write. If the page is part of a transaction sequence, identify what may be hindering the buying process. Be sure instructions are clear and easy to read. Then, apply the precepts of good journalistic writing. Write tight; get right to the point; be keenly aware of the audience for the page; don't use

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a three-syllable word when a one or two-syllable word will do; use call-to-action language; be interesting (this

last is all too often ignored on e-commerce sites). The page should be so clearly organized that, in seconds, visitors can understand its purpose and be able to anticipate where a hypertext link – or a "Continue" button – will take them. Studies show that "ease of use" is the winning factor on an e-commerce site.

## Audience

Use language and expressions appropriate to the audience for a page. Avoid Internet or technology jargon that the average Web site user may not know.

## Voice

Be aware of tone or "voice." What is most appropriate for a given page? For the site as a whole? Informal, colloquial language? Formal, business-like language? Who is the audience for the page? How well do they speak English? How hip is your audience? What does your company's voice sound like? It may evolve with a bit of trial and error. Consider whether it is aligned with broader corporate strategy.

## Wording

Again, most of the rules for good journalistic writing apply. They include: eliminating unnecessary words, using short and simple words, using short sentences, using specific and precise wording, acknowledging the user's jargon, avoiding computer jargon, writing in active voice and ensuring that the tone is correct for the user, task and environment.

## Style Conventions

A goal of good copywriting is consistency of language, style and tone. This can be accomplished in several ways. One is to develop a repertoire of key marketing phrases, sentences and paragraphs. These should be "deployed" across the Web site to ensure consistency of message. In addition, these key phrases should be used across all marketing communications so that the Web site is one among several channels telling the same story.



Another way to achieve consistency in language is internal consistency in the use of Web and Internet-related words or phrases. For this, you need to develop a "style guide" for the spelling, punctuation and grammatical use of such words as "Web site," "Internet," "email," "e-commerce," etc..

## Books

### "The Online Copywriter's Handbook"

*Robert W. Bly, 2002*

### "Net Words: Creating High-Impact Online Copy"

*Nick Osborne, 2002*

### "Content Critical"

*Gerry McGovern and Rob Norton, 2002*

### "Hot Text: Web Writing That Works"

*Lisa and Jonathan Price, New Rider, 2002*

### "Designing Web Usability"

*Jakob Nielsen; New Riders Publishing, 2000*

### "Web site Usability: A Designer's Guide"

*Jared M. Spool (editor); Morgan Kaufmann Publishers, 1999*

## Web Resources

### Jakob Nielsen (Web usability guru) on Writing for the Web:

<http://www.useit.com/papers/webwriting/>

### E-Write: Creating Better Online Writers:

<http://www.ewriteonline.com/>

### Site with tips on writing for the Web:

<http://www.gooddocuments.com/>

### Good section on wording for the Web:

<http://www.humanfactors.com/wording/>

### Usable Web: Writing Styles:

<http://usableweb.com/topics/001310-0-0.html>

## About WordBiz.com

WordBiz Report is the first email newsletter on the business of words online. It focuses on the business reason for paying attention to copywriting and content for the Internet and the Web. The words are what propel visitor and reader actions online.

When it comes to the Web and the Internet, copy and content are not just "the creative." Online words are what propel sales, registrations, downloads and any metric for "converting" clicks into customers. Words are what drive your search engine rankings.

WordBiz Report is a free twice-monthly that delivers:

- online copywriting tips
- case studies on B2B email & Web content
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Publisher Debbie Weil is president of WordBiz.com and also writes a regular column for ClickZ.com on [B2B Email Marketing](#).