

The 5 most common mistakes business people make when writing and how this needn't be you!

WRITING ... NOT AS EASY AS IT LOOKS

We read and write every day, so what's so hard about doing a little brochure? Well, if you've ever actually tried to write that "little brochure" (or anything else) you'll know — it might be easier to mow your grass by snipping it with scissors. Or more pleasant.

Read on for the 5 most common traps business people fall into when writing their own sales and marketing copy. If you find yourself giggling at any of them,

then you know that's you. Post giggle, quietly remove your copywriting headache — pick up the phone and call a professional copywriter. The Word Co. can help you with your copy, editing and proofing needs.

The 5 most common mistakes business people make when writing are:

1. I'll do it, I'll get to it, my scalp hurts, why won't this page fill itself?
2. Editing as you write.

3. Proofing your own work.
4. Writing for you, not your audience.
5. Thinking spelling is, like, just so passé.

More than likely, at least one of these rings the bell of familiarity. So what are your options? You can either morph into a human jumping bean by filling yourself with coffee "just to get through it", or, you can save time, save money and get a better result by using a professional.

1. I'll do it, I'll get to it, my scalp hurts, why won't this page fill itself?

Prioritise. You have to prioritise writing copy for your brochure or website, or any sales and marketing material. Often people think, "oh it's just a few paragraphs, I'll do it tonight/on the weekend". This soon becomes "next week", then "oh, next month will do, I'm so busy" ... and so on... until it's next year. And where are the few paragraphs? In your head — but nobody can read them there.

To write, you need to set time aside; block it out in your diary. Then, set a realistic timeframe in which to do it. Writing is not like mowing the lawn — you don't necessarily know how long it will take you. If you always underestimate how long it takes to do things, then overestimate how much time you will need to write — particularly if it's "not your thing", nor something you regularly do.

If you write it in a hurry, people will notice. So give yourself time to write calmly. Not giving yourself enough time is when you end up with a blank page that won't fill itself and a scalp that hurts from the tension of it all. And if you finish early? Pat yourself on the back and get a green smoothie or red wine!

2. Editing as you write

Editing and writing are 2 different things. They are different processes, that cannot be done effectively at the same time.

When you edit as you write, you end up culling the kernel of

every good idea until they are all crushed away.

Think of it this way: the whole writing thing is an 800m race — that's twice around the track. Writing is the first lap; editing is the second.

(Professional proofreaders actually take 3 and 4 laps.) Even in a relay, 2 runners on the same team don't run the same bit of track simultaneously. So don't edit as you write.

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3. Proofing your own work

Nobody can proof their own work. Why? Because you end up just reading what you want to read! Many business people can put together their own succinct and informative copy, but even those whose command of English grammar and spelling is spot on can't properly proof their own material. Subconscious errors go unnoticed when you read what you want to read, rather than what's actually on the page – even harder when it's on the screen.

These subconscious errors are usually either due to:

- i. “Faulty information” from the “kinaesthetic memory”. Maybe you have a “word nemesis” – common ones are recipe, receive, avocado, accommodate

or broccoli. Research has shown, that even if you try to remember to spell it correctly, if you have always misspelled a word, you will most likely subconsciously misspell it again. This is because after a while, the “seeing-thinking-doing” of spelling, gradually becomes “seeing-doing”, because your hand (using either pen or keyboard) seems to “know” and “remember” just what to do. Or not.

- ii. The split second of inattention. Because the mind works far faster than the pen or fingers eloquently bashing away on a keyboard, literals – or typos – can easily occur. Letters can often be transposed, but not picked up when you proof your own material. Why? When

reading normally, the human eye often only sees “shells” or the “bookends” of words. So if the first and last few letters are in the right spot, yet the rest of the letters are jumbled up, the word can still be read “correctly”. (See?!). It won't be correct, of course, but your eyes don't know that! Again, research has shown that the human eyes “fix” on print perhaps 3 or 4 times per line. A reader takes in the words between their eyes' fixation points with peripheral vision. Naturally, this becomes decreasingly accurate the further the letter is from the “fix” point. On average, readers only take in 6 letters accurately with one fixation. So to proofread accurately, you need to fix your eyes on almost every written word – twice in longer words.

4. Writing for you, not your audience

When you're really excited about your business (or your product or service), it's very easy to go on and on and on about it. Because it's great! But writing about your business is basically saying “we're a bunch of good blokes”. Well... good for you! But it's not necessarily going to encourage people to use your products or services.

People need to know what's in it for them, then you have their attention. Here's a good example:

Max is a very personable bloke, with much technical knowledge on his products — both of which make him an excellent salesman. But he was getting frustrated with not seeing articles on his company or products in trade magazines. He saw opposition

pieces, and saw his own (paid for) advertisements, but couldn't get his copy published.

“Our products are really good stuff!” he told me at our first meeting, after being recommended to us by a magazine editor who found it took her twice as long to go through Max's material than anyone else's.

“So let's talk about the really good stuff then, and what effect it will have on businesses that use it,” was my response.

Max also had quite fixed ideas on how the descriptions were ordered. In short, he was writing an essay for school, not for his customers and potential customers. They weren't buying his products because they

were off with the fairies at the “introduction”.

It took me a long time to convince Max that we should actually lead with the benefits his “really great stuff” would offer. It also took Max a while to get his head around the idea that it wasn't so much the product that would make people flock to him, wallets flapping, but what it offered. Remember the old “features and benefits”? Take a feature, then list the benefits of what it will offer the person or business who buys it.

In a nutshell, your customers don't want the bigger sandpit, they want the greater space to play! Think from their viewpoint, then write. And if you don't know their viewpoint, ask them. Otherwise you may as well write for your cat; he'll be just as adept at opening his wallet.

5. Thinking spelling is, like, just so passé

Or, why spelling is cool, even after school. Spelling matters. Grammar matters. Even in this “lite” age, they matter. LOL, that’s gr8. “But everyone knows what I mean...” you say. (So was that “laugh out loud” or “love on line”?...)

Well, some might and some might not. And of those who might

understand, they might think that if you can’t spell properly, then what else in your business can’t you actually do properly?

You wouldn’t rock up to your 800m race in a ball gown. People would think you were a goose, and – more importantly – you wouldn’t be able to run properly. So why

put yourself behind the 8-ball with sloppy spelling?

“Cloathing” might have been spelt with an “a” in the 1700s, but not today. Language matters. Use it to your advantage.

SO WHAT ARE YOUR OPTIONS?

Writing copy is a specialised area. It takes training and it takes skill. It also takes discipline. If you have those, and follow the steps above, you’re on the way to writing your own copy. Good on you! You may even want to draft something yourself and then flick it past a professional for an edit and proofread.

If, however, the only way you’re going to get something onto a page is by drinking copious amounts

of coffee – and you’re not thrilled to be buzzing at 2am – then hire a professional copywriter. Just think of the time you’ll save by not “quickly checking out” who’s liked a comment on LinkedIn when you’re stumped for the n-th time. Not to mention that you could actually be doing something productive during that time – or off having fun, knowing your copy is being handled properly.

If you need help with copywriting or editing and proofing, then The Word Co. can help. It’s what we do. We love replacing blank pages with words that mean something to your target market.

For more information – including “when can we start?!” – visit www.thewordco.com.au

Who are we?

Marketing copywriting. Proof-reading. Sub-editing.

From copywriting for agribusiness, ecommerce and events, to manufacturing, philanthropy and technology, I can help.

I’m on first-name terms with Apostrophe Man, love my dictionary and believe equally in the nutritional benefits of green smoothies and red wine.

I write material so marketing managers can get on with strategy and the rest of their job.

I work with SMEs and corporates on a range of materials for a variety of audiences, across several industries. I’ve also written and edited a few books.


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For words with spark

We can help

Samantha Schelling

Marketing Copywriter

mobile **0431 015 904**

www.thewordco.com.au