

The coffee-break guide to getting better words

How to choose, brief and get the best from copy and content writers

Writers

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1. What can this guide do for you?

It can help make sure the words you use for your business are the best they can be. Why's that important? Because apart from meeting someone in person, what better way is there to build a relationship than through the words you use?

Who's this guide for?

It's for anyone who wants to work with professional writers, or who needs to convince clients, colleagues or higher-ups that using a writer is a good idea. You could be a chief exec, an agency suit or creative, part of an in-house marketing, sales or new business team, or a studio manager.

Following the steps in this guide should help you get the very best writing for your job. Plus, you'll earn the everlasting respect and appreciation of any writers you work with.

Writers



SO OFTEN IN BUSINESS, THE WORDS ARE UNDERWHELMING. IN OUR EXPERIENCE, IT'S BECAUSE NO ONE'S TAKEN THE TIME TO REALLY THINK ABOUT THE LANGUAGE. OR THEY FEEL THE WORDS THEY ALREADY HAVE DO THE JOB. OR THEY WORRY THAT HIRING A PROFESSIONAL WRITER WILL BE TOO EXPENSIVE. OR THEY STRUGGLE TO GET THE BEST OUT OF THE WRITERS THEY USE.

Let's break this down a bit, shall we?

Writers

SO OFTEN IN BUSINESS, THE WORDS ARE UNDERWHELMING¹. IN OUR EXPERIENCE², IT'S BECAUSE NO ONE'S TAKEN THE TIME³ TO REALLY THINK ABOUT THE LANGUAGE. OR THEY FEEL THE WORDS THEY ALREADY HAVE DO THE JOB⁴. OR THEY WORRY THAT HIRING A PROFESSIONAL WRITER WILL BE TOO EXPENSIVE⁵. OR THEY STRUGGLE TO GET THE BEST⁶ OUT OF THE WRITERS THEY USE.

We want to change that. And if you do too, this guide will help.

1. Research shows 5% of branded content generates 90% of engagement. Where does the rest go to die?
2. More than 8,000 writing projects over 17 years
3. They're busy, or it's not their job
4. A second opinion always makes sense
5. Badly written words will cost a business far more
6. If so, this guide is definitely for them

Do any of these ring a bell?

“We tried a writer once. What a disaster!”

“Our intern does our words. They’re bright and have time.”

“We’d love to get a writer in, but we don’t have the budget.”

“No one’s more qualified than us to talk about our business.”

“We think our words are pretty good as they are.”

“I appreciate good writing, but my boss isn’t interested.”

“Jimmy in Marketing’s an English graduate. We get him to do it.”

“We don’t have the time to brief a writer. We need this yesterday!”

Over the years, we’ve heard them all. And they rarely lead to words that are any good. We’ve also learnt over the years, getting in a professional writer is not always an easy sell – unless they’re working for free (in which case, they’re not a pro).

So before we go any further, here’s some ammo to stiffen your resolve, gird your loins, and justify to colleagues, clients or your boss the value of bringing in a seasoned writer.

2. Why use a professional writer?

You wouldn't trust a plasterer to fix your boiler. You wouldn't trust an accountant to service your car. And you wouldn't trust Eric or Erica in Sales to remove your tooth.

So why trust someone who doesn't write for a living to write your words? Or expect them to do a half-decent job? A professional writer is, above all, a communicator. Their skill lies in using words and ideas to build bridges between you and your audience.

Not just one, but five

Here are five indisputable reasons to hire a professional writer – though we think any one of them is enough:

1. To evaluate your existing comms or content

As the Economist puts it, “clarity of writing usually follows clarity of thought”. A good writer will be able to analyse the thinking behind your comms and content, and judge whether it's doing the job it's supposed to do. They'll also be able to tell you how you can remedy bad or average writing.

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2. To give your comms the best chance of being read

We're all drowning in stuff to read, so why should anyone read your words above something else? Experienced writers bring a vital external perspective, and assess the key messages from the readers' point of view. The result? Your message has the best chance of someone reading, understanding and acting on it.

3. To create a clear and logical draft

A writer's major skill is structuring your content and messages in a logical way, so it makes sense and keeps the reader's attention from start to finish. If they're working with an existing draft, they'll strip out the repetition, the business clichés, the abstract language and the umbrella terms. All the stuff guaranteed to slow your reader down, make them yawn (or wince), or confuse them.

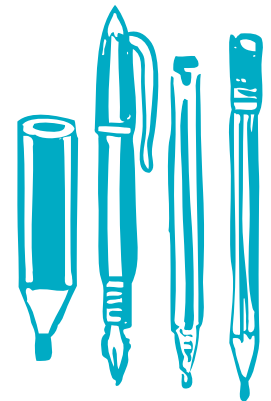
**Experienced
writers
bring a vital
external
perspective.**

4. For financial reasons

Writing can be a long, hard slog if you're not used to it. An experienced writer will almost certainly save you hours, but more likely days and weeks if there's a lot of writing to do. That's time and headspace you can devote to all the other stuff on your to-do list. In the big scheme of things, the cost of a writer is relatively small, but their contribution will make a huge difference to the end result.

5. Because writers write all day, every day

In the same way most people aren't very good at drawing, most people aren't very good at writing. A full-time writer, on the other hand, probably spends at least six hours a day, five days a week (and some weekends) at the keyboard. Multiply that over years and years and, well, you have one of the most powerful communications tools ever invented at your disposal.



3. Choosing a writer

Unlike most professions and trades, there are very few official courses, qualifications or professional associations for copywriters or business writers.

That means any old Tom, Dick or Harriet can wake up one morning and decide they're a copywriter. And many do. This can make choosing a writer a bit of a minefield. So here are a few pointers to help you.

- A. Judging experience and credentials
- B. Asking for examples or samples
- C. Assessing quotes
- D. Other things



A. Judging experience and credentials

Ask for credentials. That is, lists of similar past projects. The sector usually isn't important but the type of project often is. If someone's worked on plenty of high-profile projects for national or international clients, that's a good sign they're experienced.

But if their bread and butter work is blog posts or web pages for local restaurants, chances are their writing skills haven't been fully tested.

Sector expertise? It's really not that important

Deep expertise in any given subject or sector is largely irrelevant. Much as a good actor can play a historical character one week and a sci-fi part the next, any good writer will be able to get to grips with any subject. But a weak or inexperienced writer will struggle with all subjects. Think of finance, HR or marketing roles – their skills and experience are generally valid across all sectors. It's the same with writers.



The point is, the client is the subject-matter expert – the writer’s skill is helping them identify, develop and communicate their message. In fact, it can actually help if the copywriter's understanding of the subject is roughly similar to that of the audience.

For most common sectors, like financial services, IT and telecoms, some experience in the sector is probably a good start. But think of it only really as a guide to the writer's overall abilities. And some subjects are so specific, that if you limit yourself to choosing a subject-matter expert, you're narrowing your pool of talented writers, sometimes to near zero.

Experience in the relevant medium

The more specialist the medium, the more important it is to have expertise. Any experienced writer can probably create a decent web page, flyer, blog post, case study or feature article. But a speech, video script, annual report, direct response piece? Sometimes it's better to find a writer who's used to these tasks.

Award-winning

Yes, it's nice to win one. The afterglow can last for weeks, but in reality, awards are open only to those who bother to submit and pay for an entry and attendance at an awards bash. And writing awards are often judged by people with little experience of assessing writing. So don't be swayed by awards, too much.

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B. Asking for examples or samples

Some people ask for examples to judge a writer's 'style' before they commission them. We think this is misleading, because every brief should contain guidance on tone and style, and any experienced writer should be able to adapt their writing accordingly.

So if you ask for examples of work, bear in mind they've been written to a specific brief for tone and content. Plus, the client may also have made amends, so they aren't necessarily a true guide to the style the writer will produce for your brief.

If all the examples you receive feel the same, it's probably a sign of the writer's inflexibility

– unless of course you've asked to see a specific style.

You could always ask the writer to do a short sample specifically for you. Though only a paragraph or two, as you're asking them to work for nothing. But if you really want to get the best out of them, offer a small fee.

Either way, to make it a fair test you'll need to provide as good a brief as you'd give for the actual project. And remember, you're judging the sample purely on the writer's ability to meet your brief – whether that's for style, content or anything else.

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C. Assessing quotes

If you get varying prices for a project, there may be reasons why. Experienced writers tend to err on the side of caution, while happy-go-lucky or inexperienced writers often underestimate.

Very often (in fact, almost always) the actual scope of the work, or information gathering, is a bit vague, and the word count or page count is only a small part of the equation. If you get wildly differing estimates, it's worth a conversation with each writer about what they've allowed for.

Tempting as it may be, don't choose by day rates. They can be very misleading. In fact, the higher day rates of more experienced writers are likely to be cheaper in the long run, due to the quality of their work, the amount they can do in a day and the fact that they arrive at the best results, sooner.

If you end up having to rebuild a poor, cheap-as-chips draft into something half decent, it will make your life a misery and be a lot more expensive in the long run.



D. Other things

What's their website like?

Is it structured, well-written and free of typos? Does it give you a good impression of their experience and expertise? Do you get a sense of the value they could add to your team beyond this project?

Think about chemistry

It's a good idea to chat with each writer about your project. A quick phone call will give you a better idea of their experience and approach, which will show in how they grasp the business and communications objectives. You'll also get a feel for how you're going to get on together – especially important if it's a complex or long-term project.

Cast your net wide

Don't limit your choice by looking for a writer who's based nearby, or who can make a meeting in an hour's time. Instead, be prepared for them to work remotely. With a phone and internet connection, you can work with a writer from virtually anywhere. And yes, for a reasonably sized project or budget, most writers will happily travel to a face-to-face briefing.



Ask around

If you're struggling to find a writer, ask for referrals – you might be surprised to find other parts of your business already use writers they trust. Or check with your broader network.

Be realistic about timings

Good writers are usually booked up a few weeks in advance. But don't let timings affect your choice without discussing things with your preferred writer. They may have answered a factual question about dates, but be happy to move things around to win your project. Also, be realistic about your schedule.

A common complaint among writers is that they're never given enough time to do it right, but there always seems to be time to re-do it.

Don't let timings affect your choice without discussing things with your preferred writer.

4. Costing a writing project

If you need to know exactly what a writing project is going to cost, it's best not to ask for daily or hourly rates. They only leave you guessing how long the work is going to take.

It's much better to get a fixed price for the project. Then you can be certain your budget isn't going to take an unexpected bashing.

What a writer needs to know

To give you a fixed quote, a writer just needs some basic facts about the work...

What's the job?

Is it a website, brochure or email campaign? Maybe a white paper, blog article or video

script? Or a tone of voice programme? And, very briefly, what is the job aiming to achieve?

How big is it, roughly?

The number of pages or words you expect. If you don't know, the writer can work out a cost based on different assumptions. Note: if the task is to condense and structure a lot of information, producing a shorter final version is often more difficult (and more costly) than producing a longer one.

Who's the audience?

Consumers or business customers? Staff? Investors? The general public? The type of reader can affect how a writer tackles a project, and therefore influence the cost.

It's much better to get a fixed price for the project.

How good will the brief be?

If there's a clear, complete written brief, a writer can work much more efficiently than if they have to fill in the gaps left by scant information, or spend time sifting through irrelevant material.

Where's the information?

Does the relevant source material exist, or will the writer need to meet, phone or email people to get the right information? (If they'll be working with existing written material, they'll need to see it, or a selection of it, before quoting.)

Will there be meetings?

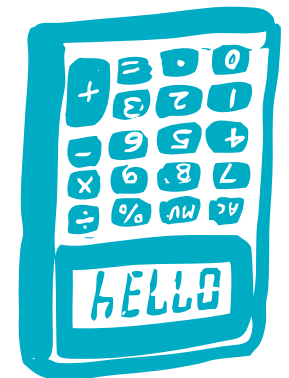
If you need the writer to come to meetings (including a briefing meeting), roughly how many? And where?

What's the schedule?

When do you need the first draft? Have you built in time for feedback? What's the final deadline?

Is there a design yet?

If there's a format or layout to work to, the writer will want to see it.



Don't have all the facts yet?

If you need a cost, but don't know everything listed above, ask for a ball-park estimate or sliding scale, based on what you do know. Then at least you'll have a rough idea to help with budgeting, and the writer can confirm an accurate figure as soon as you know more.

How do you put a price on ideas?

If your project involves coming up with words-based ideas – such as campaign or headline concepts, names or straplines – a writer could quote almost anything. It's impossible to know in advance what's involved in getting to the final, winning words. So it's much more practical to agree a budget. Set the amount you're prepared to invest, and ask the writer to work to it.

If your project involves coming up with words-based ideas, it's more practical to agree a budget.

5. Briefing a writer

Behind every successful copy or content project there's a clear, tight brief. Think of a chef putting together a dish. The better the ingredients – and the more precise the recipe – the better and closer to perfection the finished dish will be. It's just the same for a copywriter.

Everyone knows this, but preparing a tight brief – and gathering the information a writer needs to create copy an audience will read and respond to – can take perseverance.

And whether you want to brief the writer in a meeting, or do everything by phone and email, it's best to get all the important points down in writing.



First, five basic questions...

1. Why?

Why are you doing the project? What's its purpose or business objective? To launch a new product or service, support employees in their jobs, increase sales, or raise awareness?

2. What?

What do you need words for? Maybe a website, brochure or email campaign, or a white paper, blog article or script? What are your ambitions for the project? What does success look like and how will you measure it?

3. Where?

Which market or sector are you in? Where are you positioned in your market – the leader, the follower, the start-up? What

challenges do you face? Any relevant context or background info?

4. Who?

Who's your audience? Do they know you already? What's important to them? Any useful research or insights we can draw on about our target audience or company? For example, job role, location, education, attitude, aspirations, interests and opinions or industry, company size, location, and market share.

5. When?

What's the schedule? It's best to agree timings at the start, as they can affect the way a writer handles the project. If it's a large project, break it up into sections or phases and priorities.

What's the purpose or business objective?

Then the writer needs to know about...

1. Messages

What are the key messages you want to get across? What's the order of importance? Is there a single-minded value proposition? Do you have any USPs?

2. Source material

Is there existing information to work from? This could be printed or electronic material, or links to relevant websites or pages. Will the writer need to do some desk-based or on-site research? Will they need to talk to anyone – on the phone or in person?

3. Competition

Who are your competitors? Why should people come to you instead of them? How is what you're offering different or better?

4. Tone of voice

Do you have any tone of voice or style guidelines to follow? If not, do you need the writer to develop them for you?

5. Design

Is there a format or layout to work to?

6. Budget

Do you want a quote for the project? Or is there a budget to fit within?

Why should people come to you instead of your competitors?

In case of emergency...

If you have a screaming deadline, and there simply isn't time to put a comprehensive brief together, then, at the very least, try to answer the following:

Who are we talking to, and why?

Armed with this knowledge, an experienced writer should be able to work out what the key messages are and create a rough structure and draft. No doubt, it'll need developing, but at least you'll have something to work with.



6. Judging a writer's draft and giving feedback

If, at first glance, a piece of copy isn't what you were expecting, remember three things:

1. It's not 'take it or leave it'

Writing is a craft, so don't think of the first draft as the finished product. If you don't think it's exactly what you're looking for, it's fine to discuss changes. Writing is a process and a good writer will welcome feedback – as long as it's constructive.

2. Avoid snap judgements

Even if you want to change the first paragraph or headline, read to the end of the piece – to get a feel for the overall effect – before making specific comments. A good writer will have put a lot of thought

into the structure, information flow and choice of words. Consider this while giving the piece the benefit of a full read through.

3. Don't try to amend the copy yourself

Always give your feedback to the writer, and ask them to respond to it. Amends are part of the writing process, but they can have implications. The writer will understand how even a very small tweak in one place can have an impact elsewhere, and will make changes that work for the whole piece.

With these three things in mind, read the copy again – as many times as it takes – and ask yourself...



More than whether you like it, will it work for the audience?

Does it meet the brief? Think about the reader and what they're looking for. Put yourself in their shoes and ask, "would I read this, and would I respond to it?" If you're not sure, ask a colleague (or a trusted customer) for their opinion.

Is it generally easy to read?

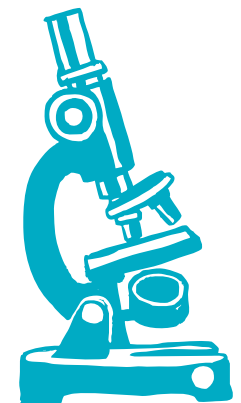
Would your parents or a teenager understand it? No matter how intelligent you think your audience is, no one ever complained that something was too easy to understand.

Does the headline grab your attention and make you want to read on?

Will your reader notice it, and warm to it enough to consider looking at the rest of the copy? Does it tell them enough about what follows to gain their interest?

Does the first paragraph make you want to read further?

Do you think it will draw your reader in, and persuade them to spend their precious time on subsequent paragraphs?



Are the key messages clear, and in the right order?

Do the important points specified in the brief come across clearly from the start? And is the most important point first?

Does the copy flow naturally and logically from one point to another?

Whether it's telling a story, building an argument or explaining something, does the structure make sense? Is this how you would handle the information if you were talking to a friend or colleague?

Read it out loud – does it sound natural?

Does it have pace and rhythm? If not, highlight the sentences that don't seem right and try to work out why. Are they too long? Too short? Too complicated? Do they contain jargon the reader might not understand, or language they might find inappropriate?

Does the copy follow any tone of voice guidelines or a style guide?

If you're not sure, ask the writer to give examples of the guidelines in action within the copy.

Does the structure make sense?

Is the factual content right?

You'll probably notice most errors or omissions straight away – but if the copy needs to be very detailed, double-check the writer hasn't left anything out. Remember the reader, though. Consider what they need (or will want) to know – not what you think you should tell them. If the writer has neglected to mention a few things, they might have good reason.

Is the copy free from typos?

Clean copy is the least you should expect, but although most good copywriters are meticulous with the detail, some things can slip through. Even the best can make the occasional small mistake, and will thank you for picking it up early.



You've reviewed the copy. What's the best way to make your comments?

- Ideally, the person judging and commenting should be the one who will finally sign the copy off. And they should have signed off the brief at the start, too.
- If more than one person is commenting, it's best if they've all seen the brief. And they should give the writer one combined set of comments, agreed between all.
- Write your comments down for the writer – in track changes or separate notes. This way, they're harder to misinterpret than a chat over the phone.
- Be specific. "This paragraph needs more detail" or "It's not really doing it for me" doesn't give the writer much to go on. What detail needs to be included, and where will the writer find this information? What is it about the writing that isn't working? Remember, it's not about whether you like it or not, it's about whether the copy will get through to the audience.

And one last thing...

If you've found a good writer, hang on to them for dear life. Show them the love, treat them nicely, and tell them if you're happy with their work.

At the very least, let them know the impact of their words on your business or your clients' businesses. Trust us, a happy, supported and valued writer will give you their very best, every time.

Thanks for reading

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