

How to choose and brief a copywriter

➡ A brief guide from Business Writing Services ⬅

A copywriter who understands your business — how it works, why people do business with you, your strengths and weaknesses, your competition and what makes you different — will be able to add impact and persuasiveness to the messages you send out into your markets.

But in order for this to happen you must first:

- Choose a writer with the skills needed to get your particular job done; and
- Brief him fully.

The purpose of this brief guide is to help you do so.

It is divided into three parts:

1. Choosing a copywriter
2. Briefing a copywriter
3. Using a copywriter

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[1] Choosing a copywriter

Not all good writers are good at writing all kinds of copy.

Former journalists are may be excellent at writing press releases and PR material but can be weak on corporate literature.

Those who come from an advertising background usually write great sales copy but lack technical writing skills.

A writer who matured in publishing may be able to write highly-readable manuals but be a dunce when it comes to drafting a sales letter.

As a client, your challenge is to choose a copywriter who is appropriate for the task you have in mind.

To decide whether a particular writer is competent and whether his competencies fit the job you want him (or her) to do you should consider the following.

- The writer's website
- Awards and testimonials
- List of clients
- Samples of work
- Price quotation
- Availability
- Commercial experience
- Understanding of subject matter
- Writer's questions
- Writer's advice
- Schedule

These are not presented in order of importance. All are important.

However we will start with the writer's website, as this is now the usual first point of contact between a potential client and a writer.

Once you have reviewed the writer's website it's time for a telephone conversation or a face-to-face meeting.

However for short editing assignments these may not be necessary and you can interact successfully through the Internet.

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The writer's website

Most writers nowadays have a website, even if it consists of just a few pages.

The overall attractiveness of a website will give you a good idea as to how professional a writer is.

Don't expect brilliant design – a copywriter is not a designer – but do expect language that flows and explains clearly, and makes a persuasive case for the writer's competence.

Content that is full of chunky lumps of syntax and poor grammar suggests a lack of professionalism.

If you notice more than just a very few typographical errors, or mistakes in spelling and punctuation, you are clearly looking at the work of an amateur.

Awards and testimonials

Don't be impressed by a list of awards you may find on the writer's website. Many of these are self-awarding.

Even where an award has been granted by a reputable institute, it is likely that the judges are looking at different criteria than you are.

The same applies to testimonials. Anyone can get a friendly client to put his name to brief statement saying what a good job a writer does.

List of clients

The most important page on a writer's website is probably his (or her) list of clients, which should show the names of clients, the businesses they are in and the sort of copy created for them.

These provide a window into the writer's competence and a good overview of his experience.

A writer who has well-known corporate clients or who has obtained repeat work from an international advertising or PR agency is probably a respected creator of good copy.

Check to see if any of the clients are in a similar business or industry to you and whether the work done is similar to the job you have in mind.

But don't reject a writer if this should not be so – a writer who is entering a new area of experience is likely to try harder.

Don't be put off if the list of clients suggests that the writer will be expensive. Most of us have a scale of fees we will vary depending on the type of company you are and we will negotiate a reasonable fee once we feel you are serious about giving us work.

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Samples

Don't expect to see samples of work a writer has done for other clients.

The copyright in work done for a client is normally wholly-owned by the client. Showing these publicly may be a breach of copyright (unless clients have agreed otherwise) and, in addition, indicates a lack of respect for clients.

Most writers nowadays will have written copy for websites so you can easily access the quality of their work on the internet. Or they may be able to show you printed brochures or similar documents which their clients are distributing publicly.

Price quotation

A writer's price quotation is another strong indicator of his professional competence.

If common sense suggests that a writer has significantly under-quoted a job, don't jump at the chance to get it done on the cheap. The writer is actually telling you is that he (or she) doesn't really know what is involved.

All writing projects involve several stages:

- gathering information through the telephone, meetings, interviews and research;
- writing drafts and obtaining feedback; and
- rewriting for final approval.

The amount of work involved in these stages will vary depending on the nature of the assignment.

Complications may develop during the first two stages that entail additional time from the writer.

An experienced commercial writer will anticipate the components of a proposed job accurately and quote accordingly on a time and effort basis.

A less experienced writer who under-quotes will soon realize his mistake and will try to cover his lost time by cutting corners, which means that he (or she) is unlikely to deliver quality work.

Availability

Good writers tend to be busy and you should be wary of a writer who is free to start a lengthy assignment immediately. You can, of course, ask why.

Like most providers of professional services, copywriters have busy times and less busy times. During busy times we are naturally reluctant to refuse jobs, especially from new clients who may turn out to be long-term customers. This means, for most writers, that a back-log soon develops.

When hiring a writer you must, therefore, make sure that he or she has worked out how long the job

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will take and can give you an accurate starting date.

Here at **Business Writing Services EU** we can usually fit in a quick final edit to a corporate profile or newsletter fairly quickly. But longer jobs can seldom be started without several days' notice, which is normally not a problem as clients are usually not ready to brief us when they first make contact.

If a job is urgent and we cannot reschedule our work without inconveniencing another client then we will decline the assignment.

Commercial experience

Another crucial factor is the degree of commercial experience a writer has, especially if your project has a commercial objective, ie it is driven by sales, marketing or corporate communication goals.

Many talented writers lack real experience of business and also an appreciation of what drives markets and sales.

You need to ask questions to find out whether the writer has the experience needed to understand and appreciate your business imperatives. If in doubt, find someone else.

Understanding the subject matter

Choosing a writer who can understand the subject matter and context of your assignment is crucial.

Someone, no matter how talented, who cannot grasp the subject he (or she) is to write about, or who does not understand your industry, will not be able to deliver quality writing for your particular assignment.

What you need to do at a very early stage is discuss your business and the industry you are in with the writer and listen out for informed responses, just as you might do when you are interviewing a prospective employee.

Again, if in doubt, find someone else.

Writer's questions

Good writers ask questions.

Experienced copywriters know what will crop up once they start to write and so ask these questions beforehand. They will listen intently to you during initial discussions and will then ask probing questions.

The less detailed you are in your discussion, the more questions they should ask.

If a writer fails to ask questions, it's a sure-fire indication that he lacks experience.

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Again, move on.

Writer's advice

Good writers proffer advice.

You can expect that good writers will have learned much over the years at the expense of their clients. They should be in a position to offer practical ideas, advice and cautions.

If a writer does not make intelligent contributions during your initial discussions, you should to probe deeper into his experience and again consider moving on.

Schedule

A schedule is always important in writing assignments.

The copy a writer produces is usually just one stage, the first, in a chain of processes involving designers, layout artists or web developers, and management approval committees.

Though things cannot always run on schedule, it is the writer's responsibility to make sure that later stages in the overall process are not delayed through his fault.

You need to make sure that he (or she) agrees the overall timing. You also need him to provide a schedule indicating how long it will take before a first draft is submitted and how long revisions will take after you have responded to the first draft.

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[2] Briefing a copy writer

Once you have chosen a writer to create the copy you need, the next step is to brief him (or her) properly, ie fully. This requires precision and attention to detail.

Never assume that, because you mentioned something at an initial meeting or on the telephone, it has been noted by the writer.

The brief for the writer should be as detailed as possible and should cover the following:

- Nature of the work
- Media
- Audience
- Purpose
- Timing
- Tone of voice
- Reference material
- Mission

Nature of the work

Is the copy for a one-page flyer, or a 50-page corporate profile? A multi-page website?

You need to be absolutely clear on what you need the text for. The nature of the work will affect the tone and length of the copy.

Media

You also need to be very precise as to the exact media that will carry the text.

If the copy is for a brochure, do you need 10 x A5 or 48 x A4 pages?

If it's the voice-over for a TV commercial, what is the length in seconds?

Audience

Who is the targeted reader, viewer or listener for the copy?

Is the target reader a no-time-to-waste CEO who will skim it (which means that the writer must make the significant bits visible at first glance) or is it his personal assistant who will read every word?

Is it meant to be read or watched by kids who'll love the product or is the target the parents who will buy it for them?

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Purpose

What is the job the copy has to perform?

Is it to inform, promote, sell, persuade, or change an opinion?

Timing

Must the copy be ready by a fixed date, such as a product launch or publication date?

Tone of voice

You need to let the writer know the 'tone of voice' you expect him (or her) to use.

Samples of other communications by your company may help in this regard. However there are two aspects to tone of voice.

The ***underlying tone of voice*** is the overall tone of the communications made by an institution, a company or a brand. This can be serious, conservative, authoritative, fun, frivolous, etc.

The underlying tone of voice should always reflect the nature of the organization that is making a communication.

There is also a ***tactical tone of voice***. This is a modification of the underlying tone so that it better fits the purpose of a particular communication.

For example, an entertainment company advertising for an accountant will modify the 'fun' tone of voice it normally uses in its communications to reflect the 'serious' nature of appointing an accountant.

Reference material

Writers cannot write in a vacuum and, if they are to be efficient, they cannot spend too much time looking for information.

Thus, in the brief, you need to specify the references your writer will need in order to build the information required to write good copy.

The reference material should also specify where or from whom the writer will be able to get further information.

The brief should also include the name and contact details of the person to whom the writer is to report.

Mission

The copy the writer delivers must have some effect on the reader. That is its commercial purpose or

mission.

To ensure that the writer knows what this effect is expected to be, you need to be able to answer this simple question: What should the reader think or do when he or she has finished reading the copy?

You, the client, should answer this in one single sentence – even if the copy is expected to contain a lot of information.

For example, if the writer is to produce a sales letter then, once the reader has read it perhaps he or she should think: *that's good; I'll buy this and take the appropriate action.*

If you find it hard to answer the question, you should collaborate with writer in devising an agreed mission for the copy.

But you must produce an answer because it encapsulates the purpose of the assignment. It is most crucial criteria for judging the success or otherwise of the copy the writer will create.

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[3] Using a copywriter

Once he (or she) has been briefed and has everything else he needs, the writer will get down to creating the copy.

The process of writing the text requires collaboration with you, the client. The writer is not likely to be an expert in your business or industry.

Expect the writing to go through several drafts and revisions.

When you receive the first draft, do not despair if it is not what you want. Do not try to rewrite it yourself – it's the writer's job to correct it.

What you should do is make clear notes detailing the problems for the writer. These will cover general concerns, such as the style and tone, and particular concerns relating to facts and details.

Be prepared to go through at least two drafts.

By the time you have completed one assignment with a particular writer both of you will have learned from the other. He will know more of your business and your expectations.

You will know his strengths and weaknesses and how he works.

So the next time you require some copy you won't (hopefully) need to find a new writer.

Just make sure that, if things weren't great the first time around, you let him (or her) know.

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For further information or advice:

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