

Use Grammar as a Marketing Weapon

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Sample of Content:

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Content:

If you're like me, you're not writing that ad, Web page, or radio script to make your English teacher proud. You're writing to sell.

If you get an "A" while you're at it, great. But don't count on it. To get prospects to click, call, or buy, you'll need to take some liberties with the English language.

As direct-response legend Herschell Gordon Lewis so aptly said, "Grammar is our weapon, not our god."

Although copywriting requires a different approach than Strunk and White would advocate, don't burn your grammar books just yet. It's important to know the rules before you break them.

Following are some rules to keep and some rules to bend or break. But first an important principle.

Clarity

Next time you face a grammar grappler, ask yourself this question: Which word construction will be clearer to the prospect or customer?

Clarity comes first because it's the prescription for fast comprehension. Copywriting that blurs meaning (which sometimes includes grammatically perfect writing) slows reading and jeopardizes interest -- and sales.

WARNING: This isn't license to play havoc with the English language. Literacy must prevail. Following are some rules to keep.

Rules to Keep

Subject and verb agreement. Whether you're writing an infomercial or *War and Peace*, singular subjects take singular verbs and plural subjects take plural verbs. Always. A simple rule, execution is sometimes problematic. The key is to clearly identify the subject of the sentence.

The active voice. If you want your copywriting to have maximum punch, use the active voice at every opportunity. Active voice: I wrote the sentence. Passive voice: The sentence was written by me.

Use of Modifiers. Modifiers can cause a variety of problems. There are the questions of which and how many modifiers to use. Again, let clarity be your guide. Also, poor placement of modifiers results in confusion, your enemy. To make comprehension easy, put modifiers near the words they're modifying.

Rules to Bend or Break

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn by Mark Twain ushered in a new era in American literature. One of the main reasons was Twain's use of vernacular. He wrote the way people talked, a departure from the stiff, formal English common during the Victorian period.

For copywriters, writing the way people talk is absolutely essential.

Why? Because copy that is friendly, informal and conversational stands a better chance of getting prospects to click, call or buy. Which is exactly why sacrificing the following conventions can be in the copywriter's best interest.

Ending sentences with a preposition. To some a no-no, ending a sentence with a preposition can warm up your copywriting. Which sounds friendlier to you: "Here is the information you requested" or "Here is the information you asked for"?

Beginning sentences with a conjunction. Beginning sentences with conjunctions (and, or, but, nor) is more common, even in journalism. Not only is it the way people talk, it can shorten sentence length, a plus in delivering sales messages.

Other informal devices. Use contractions to warm up your message. Also, use sentence fragments. Not only do they shorten average sentence length, they add rhythm. And drama.

Punctuation. Use punctuation to your selling advantage. I'm inclined to use more dashes and an occasional exclamation point and ellipsis to add drama and excitement to the sales message. Commas can be pretty subjective, so I have a tendency to use the minimum amount to keep readers moving through the copy as quickly as possible.

Parting Reminder

Keep that grammar book, stylebook, dictionary and other writer's references nearby. You're still going to need them.

But don't let grammar be your god, or your next marketing communication could be a giant sales flop.

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