

IF YOU CAN'T WRITE, DON'T

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IF YOU CAN'T WRITE, DON'T

By Bob McElwain

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Here's a hard truth. If you can't write, don't try. Do the research. Provide every tiny detail. But hire a professional to write your pages.

This costs. But not as much as poorly written copy. Face it. How long do you linger on a badly written site? It simply won't work. Period. Hire the help you need or find another line of work.

It's Not Fair

Surfers become more demanding with each passing day. They simply won't tolerate errors on web pages. You can get by with one or maybe even two on an occasional page, but only if the balance is flawless.

At first glance, this seems unfair. Most do not write well. How can such people demand that you do so?

Simple. They do know how to read. And they demand copy that is easy to follow. An error brings a stumble and annoyance. Much of either brings hasty exit.

Your visitors are, after all, volunteering their time to look at your site. Beyond a hasty glimpse at art work, unless it offends, their focus is on the content.

That's what they came for. And that's what they want. You will be judged, and quickly, by how well you provide what they

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are looking for. And the copy simply must shine. People won't linger long unless it does.

Bad Examples Give You An Edge

The abundance of poorly written sites offers opportunity. Put your site together in solid fashion, and you can put a lot of your competition out of the running.

One of the problems on the Web is that most pages are self-published. There are no editors protecting against blunders as there are in the print media.

As a result, sloppy or bad copy abounds. And if pointed out to the webmaster, the response is likely to be, "Hey. I wrote this. And I worked hard. If you don't like it, go away."

The point missed in comments such as the above, is that visitors do go away. In great big bunches. They flee from patronizing or self-congratulatory drivel even more quickly.

It's a grave mistake to look at such sites, and assume you can be successful with such copy. Further, there's a hidden assumption you accept when you do so. You accept as fact that the webmaster is "successful." Bad thinking, to put it mildly.

What's Required

You don't have to get fancy. Some who recognize their writing skills are not first rate, tend to become formal, even pedantic, when writing. That is, they put on the "top hat and tails." Which is exactly the opposite of what is required. For only great writers can pull such stunts.

You know your Perfect Customer. So just think about what you want to say, and how you would say it to him or her. In your shop. Over the phone. Wherever. But just you and your customer. Nobody else.

Chances are you'd chat as you do daily with others. Do the same in writing. If this doesn't work, say it out loud into a tape recorder. Then type what you recorded.

In speaking, we use a lot of incomplete sentences. And we have body language reflecting back at us that points out right

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quick anything not clear, the misuse of a word, and so forth. But beyond cleaning up these kinds of things, write as you would speak to your Perfect Customer face to face.

To do otherwise, as in pretending to be profound, is to risk all.

Some Writing Tips

Here are some ideas often overlooked. Each notion can be greatly expanded. However, it is not appropriate to do so here. If you'd like more information about writing for the Web, visit my site and click Topics in the navigation bar to the left. Then select Writing Skills. You'll find lots of good ideas and references here that may offer just what you need. Now to those tips, ...

Your Perfect Customer Comes First – Hold your focus on this person. Everything you write is as closely targeted as possible on this person's needs, hopes and dreams. If you can sustain this interaction, the rest is just mechanics.

Talk With, Not To – Telling people what to do never works. Whether selling or providing information, your only hope is to persuade readers to buy your product or accept your point of view. In short, always talk **with** your Perfect Customer. Never talk **to** them.

Forget About Maybes – A common mistake on many sites is the attempt to please all visitors. It won't work. Talk and sell to your Perfect Customer, and nobody else. That is, never include even a comment in hope of converting maybes.

Use "I," not "We" – If you're just one person, stick to yourself as the subject. There is something pretentious, kind of phony, about a fellow who is a one man show speaking of himself as "we." It's as if he is trying to appear bigger or more important than he is.

Believe In Your Product – If you do, if you enthusiastically endorse it, your excitement will shine through. Conversely, if you don't believe in it, ditch it. Only professionals can sell in this circumstance. Lack of enthusiasm of itself will destroy your copy.

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Never Offend Or Annoy – Offending people is always a deadend street, a truism that hardly seems worth mention here. I did so in order to point out that accumulated annoyances amount to offending. Seek to eliminate any copy that might annoy anyone.

Avoid U.S. Jargon – The Web is rapidly becoming an International marketplace. However, many outside the U.S. who read English, are reading in a second language. U.S. jargon and slang really confuse such visitors. Use dollars, not bucks. Use men, not guys. "Behind the wood shed" has no meaning for those outside the U.S.

Be Specific – Your writing will be stronger if all is aimed at making a very specific point clear. Only when accomplished, is it time to move on to another. "Stainless steel is an exceptional material," says little. If this is the point you want to make, break it down into parts that collectively explain why the generalization is so.

Write As Fiction – The better I come to know the Web, the

more convinced I am of the parallels between writing a good story and a good page. Pace matters. And emotional impact. And there's more. Grab a book you like, and try to figure how the author sucks you into the next paragraph or page. If you can do the same with a web page, you'll have a winner.

Editing Is The Secret – Edit and rewrite as often as required. Ask any good writer, and they'll tell you that some of what they release has been edited and rewritten a dozen or more times. Editing is the key, really. The final result may only vaguely resemble the original draft.

Get A Second Opinion – While there may be little need to hire a professional editor, do ask at least one other person to read what you have written. If possible, ask them to read it out loud to you. If nobody is handy, record your work, then listen to it. Hold off on this until you feel the work is ready to go. There's too much error in draft copy for this to work well.

Be Clear, Straightforward, And Friendly

Hold to the above in all you write, be certain you are

speaking one-to-one with your Perfect Customer, and the results, given editing, will be sufficient. As you gain experience, you can improve from "sufficient" to "good." "Great" is the goal, but it certainly is not required.

Bob McElwain, author of "Your Path To Success" and "Secrets To A Really Successful Website." For info, see Get ANSWERS. Subscribe to "STAT News" now! <mailto:join-stat@lyris.dundee.net>

7 Writing Muse Kickers to Fill Up That Blank Page

By Shery Ma Belle Arrieta-Russ

Nothing is more daunting for any writer than having to stare at a blank sheet of paper.

When we stare at a blank sheet of paper, we often think, "What am I going to write?" A few minutes later, it becomes, "Oh my goodness, I can't think of anything to write!" And several minutes later, it turns into something like, "Write, dangnabit! Write! Write! WRITE!"

Some writers call this writer's block. But I call it the "Writing-Muse-Needs-A-Kick" syndrome.

And that's exactly what we're going to do with your writing muse gone truant. We're going to kick her back into gear so you can fill up that blank page.

Here are 7 writing muse kickers for you to try right now:

1. First Line: Begin a story with "There was once a chance I didn't take..."
2. Cliche Starter: Weave a story or poem around the cliché, "keep your powder dry."
3. Power of Metaphor: What does "a string of laughter" make you think of?
4. Proverb Mix: "Beauty breaks the camel's back."
5. Story Words: Use the words "pianist, pencil, high-rise building, running shoes" in a story.
6. What If? Story: What if you're going to write a story about betrayal, with a young man as the main character and a locket as the key object? Set your story on a ranch.
7. Quick Prompt: Write about what you'd say to an uninvited guest.

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For more similar kickers to help start off your writing or even fill up that page you've been staring at since yesterday, pick up a copy of Shery's software for writers, WriteSparks! Lite for free =>

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