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Chapter 14

Online Copywriting

14.1 Introduction

When it comes to writing copy on the Internet, content is king. The copy on a Web page is a hardworking multitasker. It needs to provide information to visitors, engage with them, and lead them to perform a desired action—all while conveying brand ethos. It also needs to provide context and relevance to search engines. And it needs to achieve all this fluidly without appearing to be trying too hard.

Copywriting is a fundamental element of effective online marketing. Whether writing an e-mail to a colleague or PPC (pay-per-click) advertisements for a new product launch, learning how to write effective online copy will make you a better communicator.

Online copywriting entails everything from the copy of Web site pages, to the content of an e-mail, and all written elements in between. From eight-hundred-word WebPR (Web public relations) articles to three-line PPC advertisements, if it's being read on a screen, it's online copy. Ultimately, you are writing on the Web to meet business objectives, so it is important to never sway from the strategic element and potential of your online copy.

Focus on writing in a strategic, persuasive, compelling manner.

14.2 How It Works

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

1. Understand how online copywriting works.

When writing for the Web, it does not mean that traditional approaches to copywriting need to be ditched. The foundations remain—they just need to be adapted to an online environment. The first step you need to take is to research your target audience, understand their needs, and write copy that solves their problems and answers their questions while engaging with them.

Understanding your audience will guide you in determining the topics that they want to read about and will help you to organize information in a way that makes sense to your audience. It will direct the tone of your copy as well as the content.

Tip

Sometimes it helps to write for just one person. Pick out someone you know who fits your audience, or make someone up, and write for that person. In copywriting, this person who fits your audience is a **persona**¹.

The Internet has led to an audience of one. Jonathan Price and Lisa Price, *Hot Text: Web Writing That Works* (Indianapolis: New Riders, 2002). What does this mean? While your audience is not literally one person (and if it is, thank your mom for reading your Web site, but spend some time on growing your readership), it is not a vast, vaguely defined crowd. Instead, online we have many niche audiences who are used to being addressed as individuals. Online, many of the individuals in our audience also exchange information via blogs, forums, and other forms of social media.

Holly Buchanan of FutureNow (<http://www.futurenowinc.com>) sums this up with three questions you should ask:

1. A character used to represent a group of visitors to a Web site.

- Who is my audience?
- What actions do I want them to take?
- What information do they need in order to feel confident taking my desired action? Holly Buchanan, “What Is Web Copy and How Should I Use It?” FutureNow, March 17, 2008, <http://www.grokdotcom.com/2008/03/17/what-is-web-copy> (accessed June 17, 2008).

Personas

Personas are based on the profile of readers of your copy—the visitors to your Web site and potential customers. Creating a profile is all about considering the needs and desires of your Web site visitors and effectively meeting them. For example, How do they make purchase decisions? Do they compare lots of service providers before selecting one? Do they make lists of questions and call in for assistance with decision making? Or do they make purchase decisions spontaneously based on a special offer?

Web site copy can be structured in such a way that it caters for several personas, but you need to spend time understanding their needs before you are able to write copy that addresses these needs with conviction.

Understanding the profiles of your readers is an important element, and the best copy usually results from extensive time spent figuring out who your audience is.

When writing on behalf of clients, it is very important that you have clearly understood what their corporate “personality” is so that you can convey this in your copy without deviating from their corporate identity or diluting their brand ethos.

Writing an online copy—guidelines document will enable you to fall back on the styles, conventions, and voice that you are required to write for. Understanding and sticking to this corporate voice is just as important as the audience you are tailoring your content for. The two need to work together and draw from one another for direction.

By sticking to style conventions, you will assist the audience in familiarizing themselves with author personas. This way, they will know what bits of content go where in a document, and this allows for easier navigation.

Copy That Is Easy to Read

Online copy is judged first and foremost on its layout, regardless of the content. It needs to appear to be well structured and easy to read before a visitor will choose to read it.

A good online copywriter will also be able to use basic HTML (hypertext markup language), knowing that it is the appealing layout of the page that will get their words read. It should be easy for users to skip and skim the copy, effortlessly finding the parts that are most relevant to them.

Online copy should be pleasant to read and easy to scan. This means making use of the following:

- Bulleted and numbered lists
- Short paragraphs
- Clear and concise headings
- Bold and italic text
- Descriptive links
- Calls to action (CTAs) above the fold

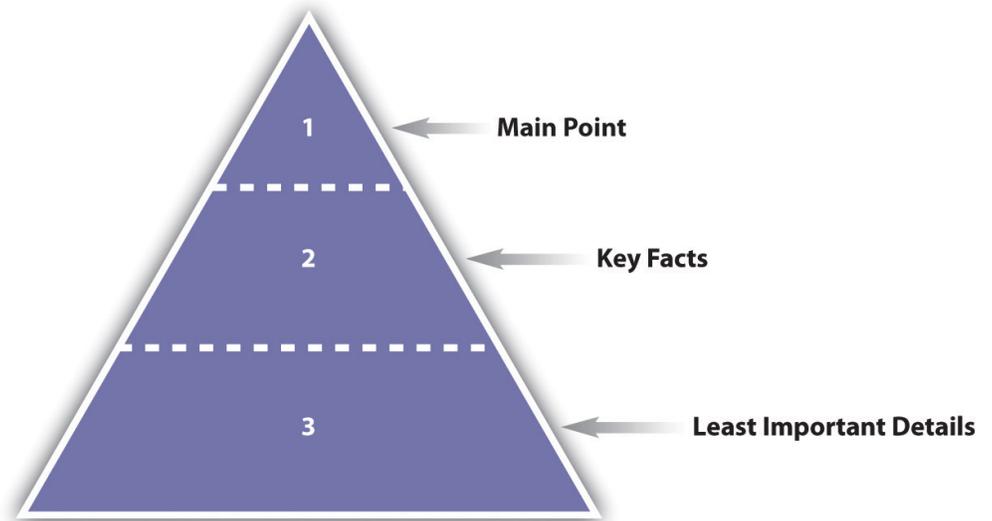
It's easy to see this in practice.

Figure 14.1 *What Text Looks Like after It Has Been Edited for Online*

| Before | After |
|--|--|
| <p>Tea has been drunk for thousands of years, and as people are growing more health conscious, tea sales are increasing. Personal preference plays an important role in making the perfect cup of tea. However, using fresh water ensures maximum oxygen in the tea, and warming the teapot first is standard practice. Tradition dictates one teabag per person and one for the pot. Tea is served with milk, lemon, honey, or sugar, according to taste.</p> | <p>Worldwide, tea sales are increasing as people are becoming more health conscious. Here are some tips on making the perfect cup of tea:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use fresh water (for maximum oxygen) • Warm the teapot first • Use one tea bag per person and one for the pot <p>The perfect cup of tea is based on personal preference and taste. Tea can be served with the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Milk or lemon • Honey or sugar |

Readers online are usually strapped for time and need to decide quickly whether or not to read a page. This means that the most important information needs to be at the top of the page. Start with the summary or conclusion—the main idea or gist of the article.

Figure 14.2 *The Structure of Online Copy*



While clever wordplay in headings and titles can attract some attention, online these need to be written as descriptively as possible. The copy is multitasking: not only is it informing visitors of what to expect, it is also telling search engine spiders what the page is about. Be creative, but keep it relevant.

Learning to Use HTML

HTML stands for hypertext markup language, and it's the foundation of documents on the Internet. HTML tags tell browsers how to present content. HTML tags are in the brackets that look like arrows: < and >.

When writing online copy, you can use an HTML editor, where you insert the tags yourself, or a WYSIWYG (What You See Is What You Get) editor, which works in a similar way to a word processor.

Basic HTML is simple to implement and will help you to lay out your content in an easy-to-read way. Here are some basic HTML tags:

- **Bold.** phrase you wish to bold
- **Italicize.** <i>phrase you wish to italicize</i>
- **Underline.** <u>phrase you wish to underline</u>
- **List.** lines you wish to list
- **Create a paragraph.** <p>paragraph text</p>
- **Insert a line break.**

- **Insert a link.** `phrase you wish to link`

The tags also help search engines to identify how the content has been laid out on the page.

The best way to get to grips with HTML is to start using it online where you can see how the tags work.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Knowing your audience will guide you in determining the topics that they want.
- It can be helpful to develop a persona when writing for a site. Personas are based on the profile of readers of your copy. The best copy usually results from extensive time spent figuring out your audience.
- Online copy is judged not just on content but on its layout. It must appear easy to read before the user will choose to read it.
- It should be easy for users to skip and skim the copy so that it is easy for them to find the parts that are most relevant to them.
- Copy is informing visitors of what to expect and also telling the search engine spiders what the page is about.

EXERCISES

1. When writing for the Web, why are descriptive titles better than titles that play on words?
2. Why does Web copy need to be easy to read?

14.3 Short Copy

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

1. Know what short copy is and how it should be used in online copywriting.

Online copy often has only a limited amount of space and short amount of time to get a message across to visitors and entice them to take action. This is especially true of banner advertising and **PPC**² (pay-per-click) advertisements on search engines, but it is also important across all eMarketing disciplines. The most important short copy of online marketing is the **call to action (CTA)**³.

Call to Action: Telling People What to Do

A crucial element to online copywriting is the CTA. Users scan Web pages and look for clues as to what to do. Don't make them think; tell them what action to perform.

A call to action is a short, descriptive instruction that explicitly tells a Web visitor what to do. Banner advertising usually involves a clear call to action, and it can also be used in paid search advertising. Call-to-action copy is not limited to short copy: e-mail newsletters and promotions should also make use of call to action, and we even see them all over Web pages. Calls to action should always be above the fold to drive action.

Note

Use active verbs for sentences in the active voice. This sentence is in the active voice. Passive verbs can be used but tend to make for less instructive copy. Passive voice is being used in this sentence.

2. Advertising on search engines.

3. Words used to encourage a prospect to take a particular action.

4. In a call to action, it is the word that conveys action or behavior.

Any time that there is an action that you want a Web visitor to take, a call to action should instruct the visitor what to do. This means using **active verbs**⁴ when you write and crafting hyperlinks to be clear instructions that resonate with your visitor at each step in the conversion process.

Passive Sentences

- When your e-mail has been received, an order number will be issued.
- A big difference can be made in a child's life by donating today.
- By joining our database, great prizes can be won.

Active Sentences

- Send us an e-mail, and we will issue you an order number.
- Sign up to our newsletter and receive interesting marketing news!
- Donate today and make a difference in a child's life!
- Join our database and win great prizes.

A strong call to action resonates with the action that the visitor needs to take, as opposed to the technical function that is performed. For example, if a user has entered an e-mail address to sign up to your e-mail newsletter, the action button should say “sign up” (which is what a user understands) and not “submit” (which is the database action).

Consider what actions mean offline:

- With e-mail newsletters, “sign up” can have very different connotations from “subscribe.”
- “Subscribe” is very different from “subscribe for free.”

Whereas subscriptions connote regularity as to the times when newsletters are sent (e.g., once a week, on a particular day at a particular time), “sign up” does not carry the same burden. There is only one way to know what call to action works best on a Web page, in an e-mail, on a banner, or in an advertisement: test, test, test. You could do this by performing A/B split tests to see which CTA drives the most clicks or actions.

Features and Benefits

Writing compelling copy means conveying to readers why they should perform an action. While **features**⁵ may seem all-important, you need to communicate the **benefits**⁶ of the features to the user, as this is the ultimate driver of action. Features and benefits are described as follows:

- **Feature.** A prominent aspect of a product or service that can provide benefit to users. It describes what the product does.
- **Benefit.** The positive outcome for a user that a feature provides. It can be the emotional component of what the user gets out of the product.

Features and benefits are very different. Features are what are important to the company that provides the product or service. Benefits are what are important to those who decide to use the product or service. This part of the copy could be the make-or-break selling point, so be direct and illustrate why they should choose your product instead of your competitor's.

For example, consider a home entertainment system. Features could include surround sound and a large flat-screen television. The benefit is a cinema-quality experience in your own home.

Persuasive writing makes use of features, benefits, and active verbs to create appealing messages for your personas: *Enjoy cinema-quality movie nights in your own home with a surround sound home entertainment system.*

Be personal, be descriptive, and illustrate that their needs will be met and even surpassed.

PPC Advertisements

PPC advertisements have a very limited space, and very limited time, to get a message across, as well as plenty of competition for an Internet user's attention. These four lines of copy need to work hard to be convincing and compelling to ensure a top return on investment.

5. A prominent aspect of a product that is beneficial to users.

6. The positive outcome for a user that a feature provides.

PPC advertisements follow the same basic structure:

Heading

A heading in PPC advertising looks like the following:

Two lines of advertisement copy,

Which can be displayed on one line

www.DisplayURL.com

Refer to [Chapter 7 "Pay per Click Advertising"](#) for Google's editorial guidelines.

When the copy of the advertisement matches the user's search term, those words are often displayed in bold in the advertisement. This makes the advertisement more prominent and can improve click-through rates. This is also why keyword research is very important.

For example, if the search term used was "roses," an advertisement with "roses" in the copy might look like this:

Roses for Valentine's

A dozen red roses for your love;

Fast, free delivery in RSA.

www.flowers.co.za/roses

Using keywords in the advertisement copy can help improve click-through rates. However, this can mean writing thousands of advertisements—one for each keyword in the PPC campaign! The paid search advertising platforms have a neat tool to bypass this problem: **dynamic keyword insertion**⁷.

7. In paid search advertising, this allows keywords used in searches to be inserted automatically into advertisement copy.

Dynamic keyword insertion allows for the search term used to be inserted into the advertisement copy. This means that you can write one advertisement, and every time it appears for a different search term, that search term will be inserted into the advertisement. In the copy for the advertisement, it looks like this:

{keyword:alternative word}

The brackets indicate that this is where the dynamic keyword should go. The copywriter also needs to select an alternative keyword to show if the search term used does not fit into the space available.

Google's tutorial on dynamic keyword insertion has the following examples that explain this best. Google, "How Do I Use Keyword Insertion?" tutorial, Google AdWords Help Center, <http://adwords.google.com/support/aw/bin/answer.py?hl=en&query=dki&answer=74996&type=f> (accessed June 17, 2008).

The following advertisement text is created:

Brand-New {KeyWord:Phones}

Huge selection of phones. Great prices.

{Keyword:phones} in stock. Free shipping!

www.BestDealer.com

The previous advertisement is then seen by searchers as the following:

Advertisement 1. Keyword: *nokia n90*

Brand-New Nokia N90

Huge selection of phones. Great prices.

Nokia n90 in stock. Free shipping!

www.BestDealer.com

Advertisement 2. Keyword: *samsung d500*

Brand-New Samsung D500

Huge selection of phones. Great prices.

Samsung D500 in stock. Free shipping!

www.BestDealer.com

Advertisement 3. Keyword: *motorola razor silver*

Brand-New Phones

Huge selection of phones. Great prices.

Phones in stock. Free shipping!

www.BestDealer.com

With limited word count available, it can seem a daunting task to communicate information that entices the right traffic to click through and that differentiates you from your competition. Testing variations of copy is the best way to determine what works best for your campaign.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The call to action is a short descriptive instruction that explicitly tells a Web visitor what to do.
- PPC advertisements have a very limited space to get a message across, so this copy must be effectively written.
- Dynamic keyword insertion will help make PPC copy more effective.
- Testing different variations of the copy is the best way to find out what works best for your campaign.

EXERCISE

1. Visit a search engine and find some examples of PPC advertisement copy. Evaluate the different types of copy and how they are written. Do you think they are effective for the keyword used? Find an example of one that may not be effective. Indicate how you would rewrite the copy so that it would perform better.

14.4 Long Copy

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

1. Know what long copy is and how it should be used in online copywriting.

Online copywriting is not just about short, sharp, call-to-action copy; however, Web users tend to scan pages quickly to determine whether or not they will read further. Even when writing longer copy, you need to take this into consideration.

Longer online copy allows you to foster a relationship with a reader, whether it is on a blog, through e-mail communications, or through articles and news releases. With more words and space available to use, you are able to establish a voice and a personality to make your copy more convincing and personal.

Getting Read: Titles and Subject Lines

Titles and subject lines are there for a very important reason: they inform readers whether or not they are likely to want to read further by giving a sneak preview into what is to come in the article. They are the gateway to your content.

Consider the following two titles:

- Guide to Online Copywriting
- Ten Steps to Writing Online Copy That Sells

The second title conveys more information to the reader that helps the reader decide to read further. Minor word manipulation that tells the reader how he or she will benefit from reading that content can make a huge difference.

Subject lines are like titles for e-mails and can make the difference between an e-mail being deleted instantly and being opened and read. Subject lines also work hand in hand with the “from” field of an e-mail. Both fields usually appear side by side in an in-box and are used to determine relevance, familiarity, and trust.

8. The name that is chosen to appear in the sender or “from” field of an e-mail.

Use a consistent and easy-to-recognize **sender alias**⁸—the “from” field—so that readers can recognize your e-mails easily. With familiarity and trust established

using this field, the subject line can be used more creatively, allowing you to build on the already-established relationships with your readers.

As with a title, use the subject line to make clear what the e-mail is about. For example, if there is a promotion in the e-mail, consider putting it in the subject line as well.

Titles, headlines, and subject lines need to be both persuasive and enticing. Consider what need your copy is meeting for your readers and express that first. Be honest and straightforward and never misrepresent the content of an e-mail as this will prevent readers from opening them in the future.

Copywriting for Search Engine Optimization

As well as the copy on the Web page, HTML (hypertext markup language) tags and metadata are also used by a **search engine optimization (SEO)**⁹ copywriter. In addition to assisting you with structuring your content, these tags indicate relevancy and context to search engines. Some of the tags are used by screenreaders, and so they assist visitors with disabilities to access your content. The meta description can also be used by search engines on the search engine results pages (**SERPs**¹⁰).

A keyword refers to the word or words that are used in a search query on a search engine. Multiword keywords are sometimes referred to as key phrases.

The first step in SEO copywriting is **keyword research**. Having identified the themes of your Web site and Web pages, keyword research should be used to identify what keywords your target audience uses when searching for you.

Each page should be optimized for a primary key phrase and can be optimized for a secondary and tertiary key phrase as well. Usually a Web page is optimized for three key phrases but can be optimized for up to five (though only if the page is very long). Any more than that and you are better off creating new, niche Web pages.

9. Aiming to improve rankings in search engines.

10. What you see when you perform a search on a search engine.

In [Chapter 6 "Search Engine Optimization"](#), there is more detail on the process of keyword discovery and keyword selection.

The following are guidelines for using key phrases on a Web page:

Remember that each page on a Web site must have a unique URL (uniform resource locator), title, meta keywords, and meta description.

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Page URL

The main key phrase for the page should be used in the URL for the page. Often, the URL is generated from the page title, so using the key phrase in the page title should ensure that it is in the URL as well. This also helps readers to glance at the URL and get an idea what they are reading about.

Page Title

The page title appears at the top of a user's browser and should be able to tell the user (and the search engine spiders, of course) what the main theme of the page is. The page title is limited to sixty-six characters (including spaces). The key phrase should be used as close to the beginning of the title as possible—keeping it relevant and interesting.

Meta Description

The meta description is a short paragraph describing the page content. This summary is usually shown on the SERPs if it contains the search term searched for, which means that it needs to entice users to click through. The spiders use the meta description to deduce the topic of the page, and the use of targeted key phrases is important here. Copy is limited to no more than 166 characters (including spaces).

Note

Keyword stuffing refers to putting too many keywords into the meta keywords' tagging and using keywords that are not relevant to the Web page. Search engines can penalize this as a spam practice.

Meta Keywords

The meta keywords are a list of the words and phrases that are important on a Web page. The use of targeted key phrases is important here, but remember: no keyword stuffing. The meta keywords are limited to two hundred characters (including spaces). Take time to consider how to make this relevant as well as convincing enough to get a searcher to click on your page instead of your competitor's.

Headings and Subheadings

Spiders assign more relevance to the text used in headings, so it is important to use your key phrases in the headings on your page. It also helps to structure your content.

Heading structures include the following:

`<h1>`Page heading. What the page content is about`</h1>`

`<h2>`Subheadings. "Chapters" of content breakdown`</h2>`

`<h3>`Information under the subheadings. Elaboration of main headings and more detail`</h3>`

Having a good heading hierarchy is important as spiders use it to move through your page. The hierarchy indicates what is more important and how the content is broken up. It also makes it easier for the reader to take in your content if it is arranged in a way that makes sense to her.

Page Copy

The number of times you use the key phrases is entirely dependent on how long the page of copy is. You want to optimize the page for the key phrases without their use being overt.

For SEO effectiveness, a page of Web copy should not be less than 250 words. On a 250-word page you could use the primary key phrase eight times (this includes use in metadata, headings, title, and body copy) and the secondary key phrase four times.

Discussion

Why should you avoid requiring the user to scroll many times to read a page of content?

The average Web page should not be so long that the user needs to scroll and scroll to get to the end of it. If you find the page is getting exceptionally long, consider breaking it into different sections. This way you could add more pages of optimized copy focused on one theme, instead of one very long page. This also allows for you to optimize pages for more keywords, targeting various search queries.

Links to Your Optimized Page

The text used to link from one page to another is considered important by the search engine spiders, so try to ensure that your key phrase is used when linking to the optimized page. The anchor text of links should include the key phrase of the page being linked to and not the page being linked from.

Images: Alt Text and Title Tags

Alt text refers to the “alt” attribute for the IMG HTML (image HTML element) tag: this is the text that appears in the caption. It is used in HTML to attribute a text field to an image on a Web page, normally with a descriptive function, telling a user what an image is about and displaying the text in instances where the image is unable to load. While this is handy for readers, we also do it for another reason: search engine spiders can’t read images, but they can read the alt text. The image title tag is what shows when you hover with your mouse over an image and can also

be read by the search engine spider. It also appears on a page where images may have been blocked or take time to load.

Neologisms and Buzzwords

Sometimes the World Wide Web is referred to as the “Wild Wild Web,” as it can seem to be an environment where anything goes. The ever-expanding numbers of social media participants play fast and loose with grammar.

With new services and products being developed daily, it can feel like the list of new words, and the new ways to use words, is building faster than you can keep up with it. Dictionaries and reference guides celebrate this regularly with a “word of the year,” usually one that has been in heavy use by the Internet audience for the three years preceding its entrance into a dictionary.

For example, in 2009, “unfriend” was voted the word of the year by the editors of the *New Oxford American Dictionary*, while “w00t” had its day in 2007 when it was featured on *Merriam-Webster’s* selection for word of the year.

Note

Firefox is a free, open-source browser developed by the Mozilla Foundation. As well as having improved and safer browsing, you can download extensions that let you customize your browser. You can download it for free from <http://www.mozilla.org>.

Online services can quickly become verbs in everyday language, so we talk of “googling something” instead of “searching on Google” and of “friending someone” on Facebook rather than “adding someone as a Facebook friend.”

Always remember to tailor your content to your target audience. If your content is aimed at cutting-edge early adopters, then litter it with the latest buzz words. If your audience does not know the difference between Firefox and Internet Explorer, then be cautious when using one of these new words.

Users dictate the direction and content of your copy. It’s up to you to make it worth the read!

A Brief Synopsis on the Process of Writing

The following is a brief list of the steps for writing online copy:

1. Research and understand your audience.
2. Establish your tone using copy guidelines.
3. Establish your business objectives (what your copy aims to achieve).
4. Conceptualize the angle you will take to get this across in your copy and meet your business objectives.
5. Write the framework, that is, the <h1> tags that will dictate the hierarchy of the content as well as a powerful title. Then elaborate in the body of the copy under the subheadings.

Things to Avoid

Even if you are a brilliant copywriter, the moment you stop sticking to online copy rules and regulations, your writing will hold very little weight on the search engine. These are some of the examples of bad practice that can have some very serious repercussions:

- **Keyword stuffing.** If you try to squash too many targeted phrases or keywords into a piece of copy, the search engine spiders will immediately pick this up, and you will stand the chance of being wiped right off the SERPs. Keyword stuffing makes copy sound forced and unnatural and is unpleasant to read. Stick to relevant content that offers the readers real value; this will naturally attract links and visitors.
- **Misrepresented titles.** Titles are often the first touch points that readers come across before deciding to pursue a page of copy. Therefore, they need to encompass what the page is about and get the gist of the content. Be sure to be true to your title; otherwise readers will feel cheated and taken advantage of and there is a strong chance that they will not want to visit again. Misrepresented titles breed mistrust—avoid this at all costs!
- **Irrelevant content.** No reader wants to go through the mission of searching a search engine only to land on a page that has no relevance to him. Your content will be seen as waffle, and you will lose authority as a credible source—in fact, you will probably chase many visitors away.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Copywriting for SEO involves optimizing copy for select key phrases in order to give context to search engines. A page can be optimized for up to five key phrases, but it is usually optimized for three of them. SEO copywriting involves the metadata and title tags, as well as the copy that is read on a page.
- The dynamic nature of the Internet means that new words are entering a user's vocabulary every day. For best copywriting, know your audience and use the language that resonates most strongly with them.

EXERCISES

1. Why should users dictate your content? List some ways that users' needs determine content.
2. For some real online copywriting practice, choose an article in a magazine or newspaper and rewrite it for an Internet audience.

14.5 Reference

Rand Fishkin, *The Beginner's Guide to SEO*, SEOMoz, February 25, 2006, <http://www.seomoz.org/article/beginners-guide-to-search-engine-optimization> (accessed April 3, 2008).