Special Report $29.00

How To
Write
BETTER
and
FASTER

by Robert W. Bly

22 East Quackenbush Avenue, 3rd Floor, Dumont, NJ 07628

Phone (201) 385-1220, Fax (201) 385-1138

e-mail: rwbly@bly.com, web: www.bly.com

Table of Contents

Section 1

Ten Ways to Improve Your Technical Writing

Better technical writing can result in proposals that win contracts, advertisements that sell products, instruction manuals that technicians can follow, and letters, memos, and reports that get your message across to the reader. Here are ten tips on style and word choice that can make writing clear and persuasive:

1. Know your reader-Are you writing for engineers? managers? technicians? Make the technical depth of your writing compatible with the background of your reader.

2. Write in a clear, conversational style-Naturally, a technical paper on sizing pumps shouldn't have the same chatty tone as a personal letter. But most technical professionals lean too much in the other direction, and their sharp thinking is obscured by windy, overly-formal prose.

The key to success in technical writing? *Keep it simple.* Write to express – not to impress. A relaxed, conversational style can add vigor and clarity to your work.

Formal technical style	Informal conversational style
The data provided by direct examination of samples under the lens of the microscope are insufficient for the purpose of making a proper identification of the components of the substance.	We can't tell what it is made of by looking at it under the microscope.

We have found during conversations with customers that even the most experienced of extruder specialists have a tendency to avoid the extrusion of silicone profiles or hoses.	Our customers tell us that experienced extruder specialists avoid extruding silicone profiles or hoses.
The corporation terminated the employment of Mr. Joseph Smith.	Joe was fired.

3. Be concise-Technical professionals, especially those in industry, are busy people. Make your writing less time-consuming for them to read by telling the whole story in the fewest possible words.

How can you make your writing more concise? One way is to avoid redundancies – a needless form of wordiness in which a modifier repeats an idea already contained within the word being modified.

For example, a recent trade ad described a product as a "new innovation." Could there be such a thing as an *old* innovation? The ad also said the product was "very unique." Unique means "one of a kind," so it is impossible for anything to be *very* unique.

By now, you probably get the picture. Some other redundancies that have come up in technical literature are listed below, along with the correct way to rewrite them:

Redundancy	**Rewrite as**
advance plan	plan
actual experience	experience

two cubic feet in volume	two cubic feet
cylindrical in shape	cylindrical
uniformly homogeneous	homogeneous

Many technical writers are fond of overblown expressions such as "the fact that," "it is well known that," and "it is the purpose of this writer to show that." These take up space but add little to meaning or clarity.

The following list includes some of the wordy phrases that appear frequently in technical literature. The column on the right offers suggested substitute words:

Wordy phrase	Suggested substitute
during the course of	during
in the form of	as
in many cases	often
in the event of	if
exhibits the ability to	can

4. Be consistent-"A foolish consistency," wrote Ralph Waldo Emerson, "is the hobgoblin of little minds." This may be so. But, on the other hand, inconsistencies in technical writing will confuse your readers and convince them that your scientific work and reasoning are as sloppy and unorganized as your prose.

Good technical writers strive for consistency in the use of numbers, hyphens, units of measure, punctuation, equations, grammar, symbols, capitalization, technical terms and abbreviations.

For example, many writers are inconsistent in the use of hyphens. The rule is: two words that form an adjective are hyphenated. Thus, write: first-order reaction, fluidized-bed combustion, high-sulfur coal, space-time continuum.

The U.S. Government Printing Office Style Manual [1], Strunk, and White's "The Elements of Style" [2], and your organization's writing manual can guide you in the basics of grammar, punctuation, abbreviation and capitalization.

5. Use jargon sparingly-Chemical engineering has a special language all its own. Technical terms are a helpful shorthand when you're communicating within the profession, but they may confuse readers who do not have your special background.

Take the word, "yield," for example. To a chemical engineer, yield is a measure of how much product a reaction produces. But, to car drivers, yield means slowing down (and stopping, if necessary) at an intersection.

Other words that have special meaning to chemical engineers but have a different definition in everyday use include: vacuum, pressure, batch, bypass, recycle, concentration, mole, purge, saturation, catalyst.

Use legitimate technical terms when they communicate your ideas precisely, but avoid using jargon just because the words sound impressive. Do not write that material is "gravimetrically conveyed" when it is simply dumped.

6. Avoid big words-Technical writers sometimes prefer to use big, important-sounding words instead of short, simple words. This is a mistake; fancy language just frustrates the reader. Write in plain, ordinary English and your readers will love you for it.

Here are a few big words that occur frequently in technical literature; the column on the right presents a shorter – and preferable – substitution:

Big word	Substitution
terminate	end
utilize	use
incombustible	fireproof
substantiate	prove

7. Prefer the specific to the general-Technical readers are interested in detailed technical information – facts, figures, conclusions, recommendations. Do not be content to say something is good, bad, fast or slow when you can say *how* good, *how* bad, *how* fast or *how* slow. Be specific whenever possible.

General	Specific
a tall spray dryer	a 40-foot-tall spray dryer
plant	oil refinery
unit	evaporator
unfavorable weather conditions	rain
structural degradation	a leaky roof
high performance	95% efficiency

8. Break the writing up into short sections-Long, unbroken blocks of text are stumbling blocks that intimidate and bore readers. Breaking your writing up into short sections and short paragraphs – as in this article – makes it easier to read.

In the same way, short sentences are easier to grasp than long ones. A good guide for keeping sentence length under control is to write sentences that can be spoken aloud without losing your breath (do *not* take a deep breath before doing this test).

9. Use visuals-Drawings, graphs, and other visuals can reinforce your text. In fact, pictures often communicate better than words; we remember 10% of what we read, but 30% of what we see.

Visuals can make your technical communications more effective. The different types of visuals and what they can show are listed below:

Type of visual	This shows...
Photograph or illustration	...what something looks like
Map	...where it is located
Exploded view	...how it is put together
Schematic diagram	...how it works or is organized
Graph	...how much there is (quantity); how one thing varies as a function of another
Pie chart	...proportions and percentages
Bar chart	...comparisons between quantities
Table	...a body of related data
Mass and energy balances	...what goes in and what comes out

10. Use the active voice-In the active voice, action is expressed directly: "John performed the experiment." In the passive voice, the action is indirect: "The experiment was performed by John."

When possible, use the active voice. Your writing will be more direct and vigorous; your sentences, more concise. As you can see in the samples below, the passive voice seems puny and stiff by comparison:

Passive voice	Active voice
Control of the bearing-oil supply is provided by the shutoff valves.	Shutoff valves control the bearing-oil supply.
Leaking of the seals is prevented by the use of O-rings.	O-rings keep the seals from leaking.
Fuel-cost savings were realized through the installation of thermal insulation.	The installation of thermal insulation cut fuel costs.

Section 2

Why Engineers (and Many Other Business People) Can't Write …

The average engineer in industry cannot write clear, lucid prose. He or she may know the basics – sentence structure, grammar, punctuation, exposition. But most engineers have just a few poor stylistic habits that mar their technical writing, making it dull and difficult to read.

Why do engineers write so poorly? Many feel that writing is time consuming, unimportant, and unpleasant. Others lack confidence in their ability to communicate, or simply don't know how to get started. A third group has the desire to write well, but lacks the proper training.

In seminars given at New York University, the American Chemical Society, the Society of Technical Communication, and other organizations, I have surveyed dozens of engineers to discover which problems occur most frequently in their

writing. Below are the five most common problems in technical writing, along with tips on how to recognize them and how to solve them.

Poor Organization

According to the survey, poor organization is the number one problem in engineering writing. As CPI 100 editor Jerry Bacchetti points out, "If the reader believes the content has some importance to him, he can plow through a report even if it is dull or has lengthy sentences and big words. But if it's poorly organized – forget it. There's no way to make sense of what is written."

Poor organization stems from poor planning. While a computer programmer would never think of writing a complex program without first drawing a flow chart, he'd probably knock out a draft of a user's manual without making notes or an outline. In the same way, a builder who requires detailed blueprints before he lays the first brick will write a letter without really considering his message, audience, or purpose.

Before you write, plan. Create a rough outline that spells out the contents and organization of your paper or report.

The outline need not be formal. A simple list, doodles, or rough notes will do – use whatever form suits you. For example, here's the outline I used to guide me in the writing of this article.

```
WHY

ENGINEERS

CAN'T WRITE

    Introduction

    *Poor organization* – lack of goals, objectives: outlining:

types of organizational schemes

    *Misreading the reader* – knowing the reader's technical background,

interests, positions, industry

    *Writing in "technicalese"* – jargon, clichés, antiquated phrases,

"corporitis," passive vs. active, personal pronouns, conversational tone

    *Lengthy sentences and paragraphs;* big words – the Fog Index

    *Writer's Block* – how to overcome the fear and stress of writing, tips for

getting started.

    *Conclusion*
```

By the time I've finished writing, some things in the final article might be different from the outline. That's okay. The outline is a tool to aid in organization, not a commandment cast in stone. If you want to change it as you go along – fine.

The outline helps you divide the writing project into many smaller, easy-to-handle pieces and parts. The organization of these parts depends on the type of document you're writing.

In general, it's best to stick with standard formats. A laboratory report, for example, has an abstract, a table of contents, a summary, an introduction, a main body (theory, apparatus and procedures, results, and discussions), conclusions and recommendations, nomenclature, references, and appendixes. An operating manual includes a summary, an introduction, a description of the equipment,

instructions for routine operation, troubleshooting, maintenance, and emergency operation: and an appendix containing a parts list, spare-parts list, drawings, figures, and manufacturer's literature.

If the format isn't strictly defined by the type of document you are writing, select the organizational scheme that best fits the material. Some common formats include:

- *Order of location.* An article on the planets of the solar system might begin with Mercury (the planet nearest the sun) and end with Pluto (the planet farthest out).

- *Order of increasing difficulty.* Computer manuals often start with the easiest material and, as the user masters basic principles, move on to more complex operations.

- *Alphabetical order.* A logical way to arrange a booklet on vitamins (**A,B,B1,** and so on) or a directory of company employees.

- *Chronological order.* Presents the facts in the order in which they happened. History books are written this way. So are many case histories, feature stories, and corporate biographies.

- *Problem/solution.* Another format appropriate to case histories and many types of reports. The problem/solution format begins with "Here's what the problem was" and ends with "Here's how we solved it."

- *Inverted pyramid.* The newspaper style of news reporting where the lead paragraph summarizes the story and the following paragraphs present the facts in order of decreasing importance. You can use this format in journal articles, letters, memos, and reports.

- *Deductive order.* Start with a generalization, and then support it with particulars. Scientists use this format in research papers that begin with the findings and then state the supporting evidence.

- *Inductive order.* Begin with specific instances, and then lead the reader to the ideas or general principles the instances suggest. An excellent way to approach trade journal feature stories.

- *List.* This article is a list article because it describes, in list form, the five most common problems in technical writing. A technical list article might be titled "Six Tips for Designing Wet Scrubbers" or "Seven Ways to Reduce Your Plant's Electric Bill."

Once I have an outline with sections and subsections, I organize my information by putting it on index cards. Each card gets a heading outline.

When you've finished taking notes, organize the index cards in stacks. Each stack contains all the cards you've collected under a particular topic. If a stack is small, you might need more information on that topic. Or, you might be able to combine it with another stack. Index cards provide an easy-to-use, modular system of organizing your material.

Misreading the Reader

When I admit to doing some direct-mail copywriting as part of my consulting work, people turn up their nose. "I always throw that junk in the garbage," they say. "Who would ever buy something from a letter addressed to 'Dear Occupant'?"

They're right, of course. Written communications are most effective when they are *personal.* Your writing should be built around the needs, interests, desires, and profit of the Reader.

With most technical documents – articles, papers, manuals, reports, brochures, – you are writing for many readers, not an individual. Even though we don't know the names of our readers, we need to develop a picture of who they are – their job title, education, industry, and interests.

- *Job title.* Engineers are interested in your compressor's reliability and performance, while the purchasing agent is more concerned with cost. A person's job colors his perspective of your product, service, or idea. Are you writing for plant engineers? Office managers? CEOs? Shop foremen? Make the tone and content of your writing compatible with the professional interests of your readers.

- *Education.* Is your reader a PhD or a high-school drop-out? Is he a chemical engineer? Does he understand computer programming, thermodynamics, physical chemistry, and the calculus of variations? Write simply enough so that the least technical of your readers can understand you completely.

- *Industry.* When engineers buy a reverse-osmosis water-purification system for a chemical plant, they want to know every technical detail down to the last pipe, pump, fan, and filter. Marine buyers, on the other hand, have only two basic questions: *What does it cost? How reliable is it?* Especially in promotional writing, know what features of your product appeal to the various markets.

- *Level of interest.* An engineer who has responded to your ad is more likely to be receptive to a salesman's call than someone who the salesman calls on "cold turkey." Is your reader interested or disinterested? Friendly or hostile? Receptive or resistant? Understanding his state of mind helps you tailor your message to meet his needs.

Writing in "Techicalese"

Anyone who reads technical documents knows the danger of "technicalese" – the pompous, overblown style that leaves your writing sounding as if it were written by a computer or a corporation instead of a human being.

"Technicalese," by my definition, is language more complex than the concepts it serves to communicate. By loading up their writings with jargon, clichés, antiquated phrases, passive sentences, and an excess of adjectives,

scientists and bureaucrats hide behind a jumble of incomprehensible memos and reports.

To help you recognize "technicalese" (also known as "corporitis"), I've assembled a few samples from diverse sources. Note how the authors seem to be writing to impress rather than to express. All of these excerpts are real.

"Will you please advise me at your earliest convenience of the correct status of this product?"

– memo from an advertising manager

"All of the bonds in the above described account having been heretofore disposed of; we are this day terminating same. We accordingly enclose herein a check in the amount of $30,050 same being your share realized therein, as per statement attached."

– letter from a stockbroker

"This procedure enables users to document data fields described in master files that were parsed and analyzed by the program dictionary."

– software user's manual

"This article presents some findings from surveys conducted in Haiti in 1977 that provide retrospective data on the age at menarche of women between the ages of 15 and 49 years. It considers the demographic and nutritional situation in Haiti, the cultural meaning of menarche and the source of data."

– article abstract

How do you eliminate "technicalese" from your writing? Start by avoiding jargon. Don't use a technical term unless it communicates your meaning precisely. Never write "utilize" when "use" will do just as well.

Use personal pronouns. If you did the experiment, write "I did the experiment," not "The experiment was done."

Use contractions. Prefer the active voice. Avoid clichés and antiquated phrases. Write simply. Stamp out "technicalese."

Lengthy Sentences

Lengthy sentences tire the reader and make your writing hard to read. A survey by Harvard professor D.H. Menzel indicates that in technical papers the sentences become difficult to understand when they exceed 34 words in length.

One measure of writing clarity, the Fog Index, takes into account sentence length *and* word length.

Here's how it works:

First, determine the average sentence length in a short (100 to 200 words) writing sample. To do this, divide the number of words in the sample by the number of sentences. If parts of a sentence are separated by a semicolon (;), count each part as a separate sentence.

Next, calculate the number of big words (words with three or more syllables) per 100 words of sample. Do not include capitalized words, combinations of short words (butterfly, moreover) or verbs made three syllables by adding *ed* or *es* (accepted, responses).

Finally, add the average sentence length to the number of big words per hundred words and multiply by 0.4. This gives you the Fog Index for the sample.

The Fog Index corresponds to the years of schooling you need to read and understand the sample. A score of 8 or 9 indicates high-school level; 13, a college freshman; 17, a college graduate.

Popular magazines have Fog Indexes ranging from 8 to 13. Technical journals should rate no higher than 17. Obviously, the higher the Fog Index, the more difficult the writing is to read.

In his book *Gene Control in the Living Cell* (Basic Books), J.A.V. Butler leads off with a single 79-word sentence.

"In this book I have attempted an accurate but at the same time readable account of recent work on the subject of how gene controls operate, a large subject which is rapidly acquiring a central position in the biology of today and which will inevitably become even more prominent in the future, in the efforts of scientists of numerous different specialists to explain how a single organism can contain cells of many different kinds developed from a common origin."

With 17 big words, this sample has a Fog Index of 40-equivalent to a reading level of 28 years of college education! Obviously, this sentence is way too long. Here's a rewrite I came up with:

"This book is about how gene controls operate – a subject of growing importance in modern biology."

This gets the message across with a Fog Index of only 14.

Give your writing the Fog Index test. If you score in the upper teens or higher, it's time to trim sentence length. Go over your text, and break long sentences into two or more separate sentences. To further reduce average sentence length and add variety to your writing, you can occasionally use an extremely short sentence of only three to four words or so. Like this one.

Writer's Block

Writer's Block isn't just for professional writers; it can afflict engineers and managers, too. Writer's Block is the inability to start putting words on paper, and it stems from anxiety and fear of writing.

When technical people write, they're afraid to make mistakes, and so they edit themselves word by word, inhibiting the natural flow of ideas and sentences. But professional writers know that writing is a process consisting of numerous drafts, rewrites, deletions, and revisions. Rarely does a writer produce a perfect manuscript on the first try.

When you sit down to write, let the words flow freely. Don't worry about style, syntax, punctuation, or typos – just write. You can always go back and fix it later. By "letting it all out," you build momentum and overcome inhibitions that block your ability to write and think.

Most writers go through a minimum of three drafts. The first is this initial "go with the flow" draft where the words come tumbling out.

In the second draft, you take a critical look at what you've written. You edit for organization, logic, content, and persuasiveness. With scissors and tape (or the word processor), you add, delete, and rearrange paragraphs. You rewrite jumbled passages to make them clear.

In the third draft, you give your prose a final polishing by editing for style, syntax, spelling, and punctuation. This is the step where you worry about things like consistency in numbers, units of measure, equations, symbols, abbreviations, and capitalization.

Here are a few more tips to help you overcome Writer's Block:

- Break the writing up into short sections, and write one section at a time. Tackling many little writing assignments seems less formidable a task than taking on a large project all at once.

- Write the easy sections first. If you can't get a handle on the main argument of your report or paper, start with something routine, such as the section on "Apparatus" or "Procedures." This will get you started and help build momentum.

- Write abstracts, introductions, and summaries last. Although they come first in the final document, it doesn't make sense to try to sum up a paper that hasn't been written yet.

- Avoid grammar-book rules that inhibit writers. One such rule says every paragraph must begin with a topic sentence (a first sentence that states the

central idea of the paragraph). By insisting on topic sentences, teachers and editors throw up a block that prevents students and engineers from putting their thoughts on paper. Professional writers don't worry about topic sentences (or sentence diagrams or grammatical jargon or ending a sentence with a preposition). Neither should you.

- Sleep on it. Put your draft in a drawer and come back to it the next morning. Refreshed, you'll be able to edit and rewrite more effectively and with greater ease.

These five tips may not make you a best-selling novelist. But, by organizing your material, knowing the reader, avoiding "technicalese," shortening sentences, and overcoming Writer's Block, you'll write better, faster, and with greater confidence and enjoyment.

Section 3

How to Write Business Letters That Get Results

A recent TV commercial informed viewers that the U.S. Post Office handles 300 million pieces of mail every day. That's a lot of letters. And letters are an important part of communicating with your customers, coworkers, and colleagues.

But how many letters actually get their messages across and motivate the reader? Surprisingly few. In direct-mail marketing, for example, a 2 percent response rate is exceptionally high. So a manufacturer mailing 1,000 sales letters expects that fewer than 20 people will respond to the pitch. If high-powered letters written by ad-agency copywriters produce such a limited response, you can see

why letters written by busy business executives (who are not professional writers) may not always accomplish their objectives.

Failure to get to the point, technical jargon, pompous language, misreading the reader – these are the poor stylistic habits that cause others to ignore the letters we send. Part of the problem is that many managers and support staff don't know how to write persuasively. There is a solution, stated as a formula first discovered by advertising writers, and it's called "AIDA." AIDA stands for Attention, Interest, Demand, and Action; a sequence of psychological reactions that happen in the mind of the reader as he is sold on your idea. Briefly, here's how it works.

First, the letter gets the reader's attention with a hard-hitting lead paragraph that goes straight to the point or offers an element of intrigue.

Then, the letter hooks the reader's interest. The hook is often a clear statement of the reader's problems, needs, or wants. For example, if you are writing to a customer who received damaged goods, acknowledge the problem and then offer a solution.

Next, create demand. Your letter is an offer of something; a service, a product, goodwill, an agreement, a contract, a compromise, a consultation. Tell the reader how he or she will benefit from your offering. That creates a demand for your product.

Finally, call for action. Ask for the order, the signature, the donation, the assignment.

What follows are actual examples of how each of these steps has been used in business letters.

Attention. Getting the reader's attention is a tough job. If your letter is boring, pompous, or says nothing of interest, you'll lose the reader. Fast!

One attention getting technique used by successful writers is to open with an intriguing question or statement; a "teaser" that grabs the reader's attention

and compels him to read on. Here's an opening teaser from a letter written by a freelance public relations writer to the head of a large PR firm:

Is freelance a dirty word to you?

Even if you hate freelancers, you can't help but be curious about what follows. And what follows is a convincing argument to hire the writer:

Is freelance a dirty word to you?

> *It really shouldn't be, because in public relations, with its crisis-lull-crisis rhythm, really good freelancers can save you money and headaches. Use them when you need them. When you don't, they don't cost you a cent.*

> *Use me. I am a public-relations specialist with more than 20 years of experience in all phases of the profession. MY SERVICES ARE AVAILABLE TO YOU ON A FREELANCE BASIS ....*

Another freelance writer succeeded with a more straightforward approach:

Dear Mr. Mann:

Congratulations on your new business. May you have great success and pleasure from it. I offer my services as a freelance public relations writer specializing in medical and technical subjects....

Here, the writer gets attention by opening with a subject that has a built in appeal to the reader, namely, the reader's own business. Most of us like to read about ourselves. And just about everybody would react favorably to the good wishes expressed in the second sentence.

Interest. Once you get the reader's attention, you've got to provide a "hook" to create real interest in your subject and keep him reading. This hook is a promise: a promise to solve problems, answer questions, or satisfy needs. The hook is often written in a two paragraph format: The first paragraph is a clear statement of the reader's needs, while the second shows how the writer can satisfy

these needs. Here's the hook from a letter written by a job seeker to the vice president of one of the television networks:

> *To stay ahead, you need aggressive people willing to take chances.*
> *People who are confident, flexible, dedicated. People who want to learn, who*
> *are not afraid to ask questions.*
>
> *I am one of those people you should have on your staff. Let me*
> *prove it. Start by reading my resume. It shows I can take any challenge*
> *and succeed.*

What better way to hold someone's interest than to promise to solve his problems for him?

A principal rule of persuasive writing is: Remember that the reader isn't interested in you. The reader is interested in *the reader.* And because we want to hear about ourselves, the following letter was particularly effective in gaining and holding my interest:

> *As you may already know, we have been doing some work for people*
> *who have the same last name as you do. Finally, after months of work,*
> *my new book, THE AMAZING STORY OF THE BLYS IN AMERICA,*
> *is ready for printing and you are in it!*
>
> *The Bly name is very rare and our research has shown that less*
> *than two one thousandths of one percent of the people in America shares*
> *the Bly name....*

Desire. Get attention. Hook the reader's interest. Then create the desire to buy what you're selling. This is the step where many business people falter. Their corporate backgrounds condition them to write business letters in "corporatese," so they fill paragraphs with pompous phrases, jargon, clichés, and windy sentences. Here's a real life example from a major investment firm:

All of the bonds in the above described account having been

heretofore disposed of; we are this day terminating same. We accordingly

enclose herein a check in the amount of $22,000 same being your share

realized therein, as per statement attached. Not withstanding the

distribution to you of the described amount, you shall remain liable for

your proportionate share.

Don't write to impress – write to express. State the facts, the features, the benefits of your offer in plain, simple English. Give the reader reasons why he or she should buy your product, give you the job, sign the contract, or approve the budget. Create a desire for what you're offering. Here's how the manager in charge of manufacturing persuaded the president to sign a purchase order for a $20,000 machine.

I've enclosed a copy of my report, which includes an

executive summary.

As you can see, even at the low levels of production we've

experienced recently, the T-1000 Automatic Wire-Wrap Machine can

cut production time by 15 percent. At this rate, the machine will pay for

itself within 14 months, including its purchase price plus the cost of

training operators.

We've already discussed the employees' resistance to automation in

the plant. As you know, we've held discussion groups on this subject over

the past three months. And, an informal survey shows that 80 percent of

our technicians dislike manual wire-wrap and would welcome automation

in that area.

Benefits are spelled out. Anxieties are eliminated. The reader is given the reasons why the company should buy a T-1000. (And the president signed the order.)

Action. If you've carried AIDA this far, you've gained attention, created interest, and turned that interest into desire. The reader wants what you're selling, or at least has been persuaded to see your point of view. Now comes the last step; asking for action.

If you're selling consulting services, ask for a contract. If you want an interview, ask for it. If you're writing a fund raising letter, include a reply envelope and ask for a donation. In short, if you want your letter to get results, you have to ask for them.

Here's a letter from a customer who purchased a defective can of spray paint. Instead of just complaining or venting anger, she explains the problem and asks for a response:

> *Recently, I purchased a can of your Permaspray spray paint.*
> *But when I tried using it, the nozzle broke off. I cannot reattach this*
> *nozzle, and the can, though full, will have to be thrown away.*
>
> *I am sure your product is generally well packaged; my can was*
> *probably a one in a million defect. Would you please send a replacement*
> *can of white Permaspray? I would greatly appreciate it.*

An exchange of business letters is usually an action-reaction situation. To move things along, determine the action you want your letter to generate and tell the reader about it.

Formulas have their limitations, and you can't force fit every letter or memo into the AIDA framework. Short interoffice memos, for example, seldom require this degree of persuasiveness. But when you're faced with more sophisticated writing tasks – a memo to motivate the sales force, a mailer to bring in orders, a letter to collect bad debts, AIDA can help. Get attention. Hook the reader's interest. Create a desire. Ask for action. And your letters will get better results.

Section 4

Improving Your Technical Writing Skills

Three obstacles that prevent engineers, managers, and other professionals from turning out good technical prose are a lack of prewriting planning; mastering the writing process; and overcoming procrastination and writer's block. Let's take a look at ways to overcome these hurdles.

Before you begin any kind of writing project, give yourself the TAP test – TAP for, "Do I understand my Topic, my Audience and my Purpose?"

Effective writing begins with a clear definition of the specific topic you want to write about. The big mistake many engineers make is to tackle a topic that's too broad. For example, the title "Project Management" is too all encompassing for a technical paper. You could write a whole book on the subject. But by narrowing the scope, say, with the title "Managing Small Projects on limited Budgets," you get a clearer definition and a more manageable topic.

You should also have a clear picture of your audience – the people who will read your document. Are you writing for engineers? Sales reps? Define the audience so that you'll know how much background information to include and how technical you should get.

It's also important to know the purpose of the document. You may say, "That's easy – the purpose is to give technical information." But think again. Do you want the reader to buy a product? Change methods of working? Look for the hidden agenda beyond the mere transmission of facts.

OK. You've passed the TAP test. The next step is to do some homework, and to gather information on the topic at hand. Most engineers I know don't do

this. When they're writing a trade-journal article, for example, their attitude is, "I'm the expert here. So I'll just rely on my own experience and know-how."

And that's a mistake. Even though you're an expert, your knowledge may be limited, your viewpoint lopsided. Gathering information from other sources publications, even your colleagues helps round out your knowledge or, at the very least, verifies your own thinking. And there's another benefit: backing up your claims with facts is a real credibility builder.

Once you've crammed a file folder full of reprints and clippings, take notes on index cards or a word processor. Not only does note taking put the key facts at your fingertips in condensed form, but reprocessing the research information through your fingers and brain puts you in closer touch with your material.

Next, make an outline. While not necessary on shorter pieces such as letters and memos, an outline can be a great help in organizing longer documents. It's important to have a basic organizational scheme before you start writing – without a map to guide you, you can't find your way.

Fortunately, there are standard organizational structures for most types of writing. The organizational scheme you select should logically fit your subject matter. An article titled "The Planets of the Solar System," for example, could be organized according to the positions of the planets, starting with Mercury and moving outward from the sun. A booklet on vitamins might be arranged alphabetically, beginning with vitamin A and ending with zinc.

Once you gather facts and decide how to organize the piece, the next step is to sit down and write. When you do, keep in mind that the secret to successful writing is rewriting.

You don't have to get it right on the first draft. The pros never do. E.B. White, essayist and co-author of the writer's resource book *The Elements of Style*, was said to have rewritten every piece nine times.

Maybe you don't need nine drafts, but you probably need more than one. Use a simple three-step procedure that I call SPP – Spit, Prune, and Polish.

When you sit down to write, just spit it out. Don't worry about how it sounds, or whether the grammar's right, or if it fits your outline. Just let the words flow. If you make a mistake, leave it. You can always go back and fix it later. Some engineers find it helpful to talk into a tape recorder; others prefer dictation. If you can type and have a typewriter or computer, great. Some old-fashioned folks even use pen and paper.

In the next step, pruning, type up your first draft (double or triple-spaced, for easy editing) and give it major surgery. Take a red pen to the draft and slash out all unnecessary words and phrases. Rewrite any awkward passages to make them smoother, but if you get stuck, leave it and go on; come back to it later. Use scissors and tape to cut the draft apart and reorganize to fit your outline or to improve on that outline. Then type a clean draft. Repeat the pruning steps if necessary as many times as you want.

In the final stage polish your manuscript by checking such points as equations, units of measure, references, grammar, spelling, and punctuation. Again use the red pen and retype it.

Even with this process, some engineers still freeze up when required to produce a report or proposal. Here are some tips to overcome the dreaded writer's block:

Break the writing into short sections and write one at a time. Tackling many little writing assignments seems less formidable a task than taking on a large project all at once. This also benefits the reader. Writing is most readable when it deals with one simple idea rather than multiple complex ideas. Your entire paper can't be simple or restricted to one idea but each section of it can.

Write the easy sections first. If you can't get a handle on the main argument or idea of your report or paper start with something routine to get started and build momentum.

*Write the abstracts, introductions and summaries las*t. Although they come first in the final document, it doesn't make sense to try to sum up or abstract a paper that hasn't been written. Yet many technical authors do just that.

Avoid grammar-book rules and English-class writing habits that inhibit your writing, such as the rule that every paragraph must begin with a topic sentence, a first sentence that states the central idea of the paragraph. Professional writers don't worry about topic sentences or ending with a preposition – and neither should you.

Sleep on it. Put your manuscript away and come back to it the next morning – or even several days later. Refreshed, you'll be able to edit and rewrite effectively and easily.

These tips should help eliminate some of the fear and anxiety you may have about writing, as well as make the whole task easier and more productive. Finally, keep in mind that success in writing – or any form of communication – is largely a matter of attitude: if you don't think writing is important enough to take the time to do it right, and you don't really care about improving, you won't. But if you believe that writing is important and you want to improve you will.

Section 5

The Key to Great Inquiry Fulfillment

Suppose you had responded to an advertisement from a manufacturer of forged steel valves and requested more information. How would you react to this reply?

Dear Sir:

Chemical Equipment magazine has informed us of your interest in our line of valves for the chemical process industry.

Enclosed please find the literature you requested. We will await with interest your specific inquiry.

Sincerely,

Joe Jones, Sales Manger

XYZ Valve Corporation

That letter doesn't call for action, build trust in the letter writer or tell the reader why he should want to buy valves from XYZ. There's no salesmanship in it, just a blunt acknowledgment that an inquiry has been made, and so a fulfillment package that should help move the sale along will not.

The tragedy that is most letters mailed to fulfill business/industrial inquiries are just about as bad. Too many marketers treat a cover letter as an afterthought, once the pros at the ad agency have written the "important" elements of the communications program – ads, brochures, and catalogues.

That's a big mistake. As creative consultant Sig Rosenblum aptly puts it, "Ads go through a long process of roughs, comps, and finished art. But those are just devices to put ideas into the reader's mind. Your simple letters can carry powerful ideas just as easily as your complex ads."

Do they? Circle some bingo card numbers and see for yourself. The responses you receive will include weak, dreary cover letters that rely on hackneyed expressions like "enclose please find," "pursuant to your request," and the ever-boring "as per your inquiry." That's not selling. Which clichés substitute for copy that expresses a company's desire to help prospects solve problems, hot leads can quickly turn cold.

Part of the problem is that nonwriters such as product mangers and engineers often write cover letters. Management reasons that the copywriter's time is better spent on ads and collateral. Yet the letter provides the toughest writing challenge. It must sell on words alone, without the embellishment of color, photos, or artwork.

The key to successful cover letters? Be friendly, courteous, and helpful. Tell the reader how you will help him solve his problem better, faster, or cheaper than the competition. Here are seven letter writing tips:

1. Thank the prospect for the lead. "Thanks for your interest" is a common opener. It may be becoming a cliché. But it's still a necessary courtesy.

2. Highlight key sales points. Don't try to summarize your sales literature, but instead pick one or two of the important sales points and emphasize them in your letter. Letters are handy supplements to literature because they can include any recent developments that a color brochure, with its longer life, may not reflect. Your letter can focus on a recent case history, a new application, a product improvement, or an addition to your manufacturing facility.

If you must include more than two or three sales points, you can use "bullets" or numbers to set them apart (as this article does). Here's a sample from the Spartan Co.:

Dear Mr. Guterl:

Thanks for your interest in our Dry S02 Scrubbing Systems for industrial and utility air pollution control.

Unlike conventional "wet" Dry Scrubbing Systems removes chemical and particulate waste products as a free-flowing dry powder that is easy to handle and safe to dispose of. The system produces no sludge – so you don't need expensive thickeners, clarifies, or other wastewater treatment equipment.

In addition to eliminating the sludge problem, Dry Scrubbing gives you these advantages:

Less energy consumption

Lower operating and capital costs

High system reliability; less maintenance

No reheat required

The enclosed brochure provides a fairly complete description of how the system works. Our representative in your area, listed on the "Spartan Reps" sheet, will be happy to answer your questions.

Sincerely,

Gary Blake, Product Manger

Dry Scrubbing Systems

Notice how the writer structured the letter to give one feature ("no sludge") top billing, while still touching lightly upon other important advantages of the system. The letter makes some sales points and whets the reader's interest in the literature he requested.

3. Tell the reader about the next step in the buying process. Make it easy for him or her. A portion of a good cover letter illustrates the point. The writer

suggests a course of action (sending in a material sample for evaluation) that can solve the customer's problem and result in the sale of a mineral pelletizer:

The key question, of course, is the cost of equipment to handle the volume required at your plant. Because the capacity of our Pelletizers will vary slightly with the particulates involved, we'll be glad to take a look at a random five gallon sample of your material. We'll evaluate it and get back to you with our equipment recommendation. If you will note with your sample the size pellets you prefer and the volume you wish to handle, we can give you an estimate of the cost involved.

From this point on we can do an exploratory pelletizing test, a full day's test run or will rent you a production machine with an option to purchase. You can see for yourself how efficiently it works and how easy it is to use. Of course the equipment can be purchased outright too.

4. Write in a conversational tone. Your sales letter is communication from one human being to another – not from one corporate entity to the next. Warmth, humor, understanding, and an eagerness to be helpful are what make you the super salesperson you are.

Why not endow your letters with those same positive qualities?

Note how the letter above uses a casual, almost folksy tone to win the reader's confidence and attention.

One way to achieve an easy, natural style is to eliminate "whiskers" from your writing – those hackneyed expressions that drain the life and personality from sales letters. Antiquated phrases from the vocabulary of the bureaucrat make a person (and his company) come across as a stuffed shirt.

Here are 10 hackneyed expressions to avoid:

Enclosed please find...

The reader can find it on his own. Just say "I'm enclosing" or "Here is."

When time permits...

Poetic, but inaccurate. Time doesn't permit; people do.

Please don't hesitate to call.

You really mean "feel free to call."

We are this date in receipt of...

Say instead, "Today we received."

As per your request...

Of even date...

Translation: "today."

Pursuant to your orders...

That's too formal. Just say, "As you requested," or "Following your instructions."

Whereas. . .

Use "where" or "while."

Kindly advise...

As opposed to "unkindly"? It's unnecessary.

Hitherto, whereby, thereby, herein, therein, thereof, heretofore...

Avoid those archaic, stilted words.

5. Have a "you orientation." Good letters writers know that the word "you" may well be the most important word in their vocabulary. A "you" orientation means thinking about what the reader needs, wants, and desires. It means not tooting your own horn. It means translating the technical features of a product into benefits that help the reader do his job, serve his customers, and please his boss. And, it means addressing the reader directly as "you." Remember, a sales letter is a personal communication, not a cold recitation of scientific technicalities.

6. Be concise. Use small words and short sentences. And break the writing up into many short paragraphs. Brevity makes writing easy to read. Run-on sentences and long chunks of unbroken text bore and intimidate readers.

It's best to get to the point in the fewest words possible. Here's how the Acme Slide Rule Co. gets its message across in just two tightly written paragraphs:

Dear Ms. Sherman:

> *Thanks for your interest in the Acme Slide Rule. It has been used by thousands of scientists, technicians, and engineers throughout the world. We feel that you, too, will find it a handy reference tool in your work.*

> *The Slide Rules are $10.00 each in quantities of fewer than 100, or $8.00 in lots of 100 or more. If you'd like to obtain one or more of the Slide Rules, just send your check or money order for the number you desire. We will see to it that your order is handled promptly.*

Cordially,

S.D. Jameson

Customer Service Representative

7. Make it look professional. Type the letter on a good electric typewriter. Proofread to eliminate errors in spelling, punctuation, grammar, and content. Or reproduce the letter on your stationery using a high-quality offset press.

In addition to the literature and cover letter, a fulfillment package should contain a reply element. It can be a specification sheet, an order form or a questionnaire known as the bounce-back card.

Bounce-backs are postage-paid postcards addressed to the advertiser. They ask the prospect to qualify himself by answering a few questions. Typically, a bounce-back questionnaire asks the prospect's phone number, name, and address, the name and size of his company, whether he specifies or recommends a particular type of product, current buying plans, applications, the names of others

in the company involved in the buying decision, whether the prospect currently uses the advertiser's products or those of a competitor, whether the prospect wants a salesperson to call and whether the inquiry is for an immediate need, a future need, or reference information only.

Bounce-back postcards may be separate from the rest of the package, or they may be printed as tear-out inserts in brochures and catalogs. Some companies combine the bounce-back questionnaire, cover letter copy and catalog information on a single sheet.

Most industrial marketing experts agree that the bounce-back is an integral part of the fulfillment package. "If you're not contacting the respondent personally, you should have a bounce-back card," says Robert L. Sieghardt, president of Professional Sales Support, a company that screens sales leads by telephone. Mr. Sieghardt says that 55% of prospects will respond with a bounce-back card after a series of three mailings in addition to the initial mailing.

Some advertisers respond to inquiries by mailing a bounce-back card without an accompanying piece of literature. They hope to avoid sending expensive sales brochures to students, competitors, brochure collectors, and other nonprospects. But other firms criticize the practice because it delays getting information to respondents by creating an additional and unnecessary step in the sales sequence.

"I think you're trying to kill response by not sending a brochure," says Larry Whisehant, advertising manger of Koch Engineering, a manufacturer of chemical equipment. "The proper literature – what the respondent is asking for – is the most important part of the package."

Mr. Sieghardt agrees: "By trying to *screen* leads with the bounce-back, manufacturers are asking prospects to do some of their work for them."

No two marketers agree on what makes the perfect fulfillment package. But one thing is clear: the advertiser who casually tosses a brochure in the mail with a hastily dictated cover note is wasting sales opportunities.

The entire package must be designed to generate action that leads to a sale. And to accomplish that, you need three things: a clear, crisp cover letter that motivates prospects; a brochure that informs them; and a bounce-back or other reply element that makes it easy for them to respond.

Section 6

On Target Advertising

Ever since Volney Palmer opened the world's first advertising agency in 1843, marketing professionals have been arguing, debating, and searching for the answer to the question. "What makes a good advertisement?" That this debate has never been settled is obvious to anyone who has ever created an ad for a client's approval – or tried to get top management to approve a piece of copy.

Despite the billions of dollars spent by American business in creating, running, testing, and measuring advertising effectiveness, no one has discovered a magic secret that will ensure a winner every time. If such a secret existed, the person who knew it would be a multi-billionaire.

At the same time, we recognize that some ads are successful, while others are not. We see that certain companies and copywriters hit the mark more often than they miss … while others don't. We will explore the techniques, methods, and principles that can help improve the odds that the next ad you create will be a winner – one that generates the immediate sales results you desire.

Through long years of experience, advertisers and advertising agencies have uncovered some basic principles of sound advertising strategy, copywriting, and design. Following these suggestions won't guarantee you a winner. But it can help to prevent you from making costly mistakes that could destroy the selling power of a potentially lucrative ad. The following are ten rules that I have gleaned from years of experience in the field:

1. THE RIGHT PRODUCT FOR THE RIGHT AUDIENCE

The first step is to make sure you are advertising a product that is potentially useful to the people reading your advertisement. This seems to be a simple and obvious rule. Yet, many clients believe that a great ad can sell anything to anyone. They are wrong.

"Copy cannot create desire for a product," writes Eugene Schwartz in his book, *Breakthrough Advertising.* "It can only focus already-existing desires onto a particular product. The copywriter's task is not to create this mass desire – but to channel and direct it." For example, no advertisement, no matter how powerfully written, will convince the vegetarian to have a steak dinner at your new restaurant. But your ad might – if persuasively worded – entice him or her to try your salad bar.

Charles Inlander, of the People's Medical Society, is a master at finding the right product for the right audience. His ad, "Do you recognize the seven early warning signs of high blood pressure?", sold more than 20,000 copies of a $4.95 book on blood pressure when it ran approximately 10 times in *Prevention Magazine* over a three year period. "First, you select your topic," said Inlander, explaining the secret of his advertising success, "then you must find the right place to advertise. It's important to pinpoint a magazine whose readers are the right prospects for what you are selling." In other words, the right product for the right audience.

2. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE HEADLINE

Next to the selection of subject matter and the placement of your ad in the proper publication, the headline is the most important element of your ad.

The main purpose of the headline is to grab the reader's attention and make him stop long enough to notice and start reading your ad. You can achieve this in several ways. For example, here's an attention grabbing headline from an ad published in my local newspaper.

IMPORTANT NEWS FOR WOMEN WITH FLAT OR THINNING HAIR

This headline is effective in gaining the attention of the prospect for two reasons:

(1) It promises important news, and (2) it identifies the prospects for the service (women with flat or thinning hair). Incidentally, this ad persuades more than 1,200 readers a month to clip a coupon and send for a free brochure on a hair conditioning procedure.

3. THE VISUAL WORKS WITH THE HEADLINE

The ad should be illustrated with a photograph or drawing that visually communicates the main idea in the headline.

Together, the headline and visual should get the gist of your sales pitch across to the reader. "Every good ad should be able to stand as a poster," writes Alastair Crompton in his book, *The Craft of Copywriting.* "The reader should never have to dip into the small print in order to understand the *point* of the story."

Often simple visuals are the best visuals. "We tested two different mail order ads selling a collector's reproduction of a watch originally manufactured in the 1920's," said Will Stone, of the Hamilton Watch Company. "One ad used a large dramatic photo showing the watch against a plain background. The other visual had less emphasis on the product and focused on a scene depicting the 'roaring twenties' period during which the watch was originally made. It showed

flappers and a 1920's car. The ad with the straight product photo – 'product as hero' – generated three times as many sales as the other version."

As a general rule, simple visuals that show the product or illustrate some aspect of its use are better than unusual, creative concepts that can actually *hide* what you are selling, thus reducing the ad's selling power.

4. THE LEAD PARAGRAPH EXPANDS ON THE THEME OF THE HEADLINE

The lead must instantly follow up on the idea expressed in the headline. For instance, if the headline asks a burning question, the lead should immediately answer it. The promises made to the reader in the headline (e.g., "Learn the secrets to richer, moister chocolate cake") must be fulfilled in the first few paragraphs of copy. Otherwise, the reader feels disappointed and turns the page.

Here is an example of how this works. This is from an ad selling a business opportunity:

> QUIT YOUR JOB OR START
>
> PART-TIME
>
> *Chimney Sweeps Are Urgently Needed Now*
>
> My name is Tom Risch. I'm going to show you how to make $200
>
> a day saving people from dangerous chimney fires...

Do not waste the reader's time with a "warm-up" paragraph. Instead, go straight to the heart of the matter. In editing a first draft, an important question to ask yourself is, "Can I eliminate my first paragraph and start with my second or third paragraph?" Eight times out of ten, you can – and the copy will be strengthened as a result.

Wouldn't advertising help your business?

The competition is fierce!
You need more sales power to get the
business you want. We create compelling
ads, classified ads, sales promotion, catalogs.
Phone today. You've nothing to lose, everything to gain.

Call Fred Lewis, President
Lewis Advertising Agency
17 Academy Street, Newark, NJ. 07102
(201) 642-4800
Member American Association of Advertising Agencies

5. THE LAYOUT DRAWS THE READER INTO THE AD

This is something that cannot be described in words but is experienced visually. Take a minute or two to flip through ads. Some ads will seem friendly, others inviting. And some will seen to draw your eye to the page, and make reading a pleasure. This is the type of layout you want to use in your ads. Avoid layouts that make the ad hard to read or discourage readers from even trying.

One key point to keep in mind is that your ad should have a "focal point" – a central, dominant visual element that draws the reader's eye to the page. This is usually the headline or the visual. (I often prefer to make it the headline, since a good headline can usually communicate more effectively than a picture.) But it might also be the coupon, or perhaps the lead paragraph of copy. Keep in mind that when there are two or more equally prominent visuals competing for the eye's attention, readers become confused and don't know where to "enter" your ad and start reading. Always make one element larger and more prominent than the others.

6. THE BODY COPY SUPPORTS AND EXPANDS UPON THE IDEA PRESENTED IN THE HEADLINE AND LEAD PARAGRAPH OF COPY

What facts should be included in your body copy? Which should be left out? The decision is made by listings all the key points and then deciding which are strongest and will best convince the reader to respond to your advertisement.

Start by listing all the features of your products and the *benefits* people get from each feature. For instance, a *feature* of an air conditioner is that its energy efficiency rating is 9.2; the *benefit* is a lower electric hill.

After making a complete list of features and benefits, list them in order of importance. Then begin your body copy with the most important benefit. Incorporate the rest of the benefits on your list until you have sufficient copy. Now, you've written copy that highlights the most important reasons to buy the product, given the space limitations of your ad.

7. BE SPECIFIC

"Platitudes and generalities roll off the human understanding like water from a duck," wrote Claude Hopkins in his classic book, *Scientific Advertising*. "They leave no impression whatever."

The most common mistake I see in advertising today is "lazy copy" – copy written by copywriters who were too lazy to take the time to learn about their audience and understand the features and benefits of their product – the reasons why someone would want to buy it.

Good advertising is effective largely because it is specific. There are two benefits to being specific: First, it gives the customer the information he or she needs before making a buying decision. Second, it creates believability. As Hopkins points out, people are more likely to believe a specific factual claim than a boast, superlative, or generalization.

Does this mean ad copy should be a litany of facts and figures? No. But the copywriter's best weapon is the selective use of facts to support his sales pitch. Here are some examples of well-written, specific, factual copy, taken from ads:

One out of every four Americans has high blood pressure. Yet only half these people know it. You may be one of them. If you are over forty, you owe it to yourself to have your blood pressure checked…

The Mobilaire ® 5000.59 is pounds of Westinghouse air conditioning in a compact unit that cools rooms 12'x16' or smaller. Carry one home, install it in minutes – it plugs in like a lamp into any adequately wired circuit. Fits any window 19 1/8" to 42" wide.

BluBlockers filter out blue light making everything appear sharper, clearer and with greater 3-dimensional look to it. Blue is the shortest light wave in the visible spectrum and focuses slightly in front of our retina which is the focusing screen in our eyes. By filtering out the blue in the BlueBlocker lenses, our vision is enhanced and everything appears to have a 3-dimensional look to it. But there's more…

8. START WITH THE PROSPECT, NOT THE PRODUCT

This may sound like a contradiction, but it's not.

Your ad must be packed with information about the product. The information must be *important to the reader* … information that he will find interesting or fascinating … information that will answer his questions, satisfy his curiosity, or cause him to believe the claims you make. Information, in short, that will convince him to buy your product.

The reader's own concerns, needs, desires, fears, and problems are all more important to him than your product, your company, and your goals. Good

advertising copy, as Dr. Jeffery Lant points out, is "client-centered." It focuses on the prospect and how your product solves his problem.

For instance, instead of saying, "We have more than 50 service centers nationwide." Translate this statement into a reader benefit: "You'll be assured of prompt, courteous service and fast delivery of replacement parts from one of our 50 service centers located nationwide." Don't say "energy efficient" when you can say "cuts your summer electric bills in half."

The real "star" of your ad is the half. Your product is second, and is only of concern in that it relates to a need, desire, or problem the reader has or a benefit he wants. Your company is a distant third the least important element of your copy – if is only of concern if it measures those prospects who want to do business with a well-known firm that has a good reputation and is financially stable.

9. WRITE IN A CLEAR, SIMPLE NATURAL, CONVERSATIONAL STYLE

According to *Business Marketing* magazine's Copy Chasers, a panel of judges who regularly critique advertising in a monthly column, good ad copy should sound like "one friend talking to another."

I agree. Copy should not be pompous, remote, aloof, or written in "corporatese." The most effective copy is written in a plain, simple, conversational style – the way a sincere person talks when he wants to help or advise you.

I think Madison Avenue has created an accepted style for ad copy that all the big agencies now use. This "style" is the type of copy that seems to deliberately remind you that you are reading an ad. It is self conscious copy. Avoid this type of slick lingo.

Read some of the ads in the mail order, health care, financial, and lead generating chapters of this book. This is the type of style and tone you want to achieve.

10. DECIDE WHAT YOU WANT THE READER TO DO NEXT – THEN ASK HIM TO DO IT – AND MAKE IT EASY

There are three steps for turning your ad into a response-generating marketing tool. First, decide what type of response you want. What action do you want the reader to take? Do you want your prospect to phone or write you, or clip a coupon and mail it back to you? Do you want the reader to visit your store, request a copy of your catalog or sales brochure, set up an appointment to see a salesperson, test drive your product, or order your product directly from the ad? Decide what you want the reader to do.

Second, tell the reader to do it. The last few paragraphs of your copy should spell out the action you want the reader to take and give him reasons to take it. For instance:

> Just clip the coupon or call toll-free now and we'll send you this policy **FREE** without obligation as a special introduction to **EMPLOYMENT GUIDE.**

> So why not call 1-800-FINE4WD for a dealer convenient to you?

> Just send in the card (or the coupon) and have some fun with your first issue. Then pay us *after* you've taken a look.

> And send for DISPLAY MASTERS' invaluable FREE booklet on Point-of Purchase Marketing. "33 Ways to Better Displays: What Every Marketing Executive Should Know About Point-of-Purchase Displays in Today's Market."

The third step is to give the reader a mechanism for responding. Emphasize this mechanism in your layout to simplify the process of making contact with you.

In print advertising, this is accomplished through the use of a toll-free phone number (usually printed in large type to attract attention to it) or by

including a coupon you to insert a reply card, which is bound into the magazine and appears opposite your ad. This is an expensive technique, but it can dramatically increase replies.

Even if your ad is not primarily a response ad (and with rare exception, I can't understand why you wouldn't want response), you should still make it easy for your reader to get in touch should he want to do business with you. This means always including an address and telephone number.

Recently, I saw a television commercial for Lilco (Long Island Lighting Company) offering a free booklet on electricity. The ad informed viewers they could get the booklet by calling their local Lilco office – but no phone number was mentioned in the commercial! This is a response-killing mentality that many advertisers embrace that I will never understand. Why make it difficult for people to get in touch with you or order your product? It doesn't make sense.

Section 7

How to Write a Good Advertisement

To define what constitutes good print advertising, we begin with what a good print ad is not:

- It is not creative for the sake of being creative.
- It is not designed to please copywriters, art directors, agency presidents or even clients.
- Its main purpose is not to entertain, win awards or shout at the readers, "I am an ad. Don't you admire my fine writing, bold graphics and clever concept?"

In other words, ignore most of what you would learn as a student in any basic advertising class or as a trainee in one of the big Madison Avenue consumer ad agencies.

Okay. So that's what an ad shouldn't be. As for what an ad should be, here are some characteristics shared by successful direct response print ads:

- They stress a benefit. The main selling proposition is not cleverly hidden but is made immediately clear. Example: "How to Win Friends and Influence People."

- They arouse curiosity and invite readership. The key here is not to be outrageous but to address the strongest interests and concerns of your target audience. Example: "Do you Make These Mistakes in English?" appeals to the reader's desire to avoid embarrassment and write and speak properly.

- They provide information. The headline "How to Stop Emission Problems – at Half the Cost of Conventional Air Pollution Control Devices" lures the reader because it promises useful information. Prospects today seek specific, usable information on highly specialized topics. Ads that provide information the reader wants get higher readership and better response.

- They talk to the reader. Why are so many successful control ads written by direct response entrepreneurs rather the top freelance copywriters and direct response agencies?

My theory is that when people see a non-direct response ad, they know it's just a reminder-type ad and figure they don't have to read it.

Because, although these entrepreneurs may not be professional writers, they know their product, their audience and what holds their audiences' interest. And that is far more important than copywriting technique or style.

- They are knowledgeable. Successful ad copy reflects a high level of knowledge and understanding of the product and the problem it solves. An effective technique is to tell the reader something he already knows, proving that you, the advertiser, are well-versed in his industry, application or requirement.

An opposite style, ineffectively used by many "professional" agency copywriters, is to reduce everything to the simplest common denominator and assume the reader is completely ignorant. But this can insult the reader's intelligence and destroy your credibility with him.

- They have a strong free offer. Good ads contain a stronger offer. They tell the reader the next step in the buying process and encourage him to take it NOW.

All ads should have an offer, because the offer generates immediate response and business from prospects that are ready to buy now or at least thinking about buying. Without an offer, these "urgent" prospects are not encouraged to reach out to you, and you lose many potential customers.

In addition, strong offers increase readership, because people like ads that offer them something – especially if it is free and has high perceived value.

Writers of image advertising may object, "But doesn't making an offer cheapen the ad, destroy our image? After all, we want awareness, not response." But how does offering a free booklet weaken the rest of the ad? It doesn't, of course. The entire notion that you cannot simultaneously elicit a response and communicate a message is absurd and without foundation.

- They are designed to emphasize the offer.
  Graphic techniques such as "kickers" or eyebrows (copy lines above the headline), bold headlines, liberal use of subheads, bulleted or numbered copy points, coupons, sketch of a telephone, toll-free numbers set in large

type, pictures of response booklets and brochures, dashed borders, asterisks, and marginal notes make your ads more eye-catching and response-oriented, increasing readership.

Why? My theory is that when people see a non-direct response ad, they know it's just a reminder-type ad and figure they don't have to read it. But when they see response-type graphic devices, these visuals say to the reader, "Stop! This is a response ad! Read it so you can find out what we are offering. And mail the coupon – so you can get it NOW!"

- They are clearly illustrated. Good advertising does not use abstract art or concepts that force the reader to puzzle out what is being sold. Ideally, you should be able to understand exactly what the advertiser's proposition is within five seconds of looking at the ad. As John Caples observed a long time ago, the best visual for an ad for a record club is probably a picture of records.

At about this point, someone from DDB will stand up and object: "Wait a minute. You said these are the characteristics of a successful direct response ad. But isn't general advertising different?"

Maybe. But one of the ways to make your general advertising more effective is to write and design it as a direct response ad. Applying all the stock-in-trade techniques of the direct marketer (coupons, toll-free numbers, free booklets, reason-why copy, benefit-headlines, informative subheads) virtually guarantees that your advertisement will be better read – and get more response – than the average "image" ad.

I agree with Howard Ruff when he says that everything a marketer does should be direct response. I think the general advertising people who claim that a coupon or free booklet offer "ruins" their lyrical copy or stark, dramatic layout are ineffectual artists more interested in appearance and portfolios than results.

Section 8

7 Ways to Create Business Publication Advertising That Gets Results

How do you create an industrial or trade ad that gets attention, wins high readership scores, and generates a steady flow of valuable inquiries that convert easily to sales?

Here are some ideas, based on study (conducted to gather material for my book, *Ads That Sell*) of some advertisements that have proven successful in the marketplace:

1. Put a benefit in the headline.

The most successful ad I ever wrote (which was the number one inquiry producer in four consecutive insertions) had the headlines:

> HOW TO SOLVE YOUR EMISSIONS PROBLEMS...
>
> ... at half the energy cost on conventional venturi scrubbers.

The headline combines a powerful benefit ("half the energy cost") with the promise of useful information ("how to") addressed directly at the reader's specific problem ("solve your emissions problems").

2. Ask a provocative question.

My friend Bob Pallace wrote an ad that generated an immediate $1 million increase in billings for his ad agency in Silver Spring, Maryland. The headline was:

> ARE YOU TIRED OF WORKING FOR
>
> YOUR AD AGENCY?

The ad ran only one time in each of three magazines (*High-Tech Marketing*, *Business Marketing, Inc.*) and immediately brought in five new clients.

3. Be direct.

An ad agency asked me to write an ad to generate sales leads for a client that repairs and restores old surgical tables. When they sent me their literature, I used the headline on their brochure as the headline for the ad.

It read:

SURGICAL TABLES REBUILT

Free Loaners Available

The ad was successful, and demonstrates that when you are the only one advertising a particular product or service, or when the nature of your offer is hard to grasp, direct headlines can be extremely effective. Another direct headline I like appeared in an ad running in Network World:

LINK 8 PCS TO YOUR MAINFRAME

ONLY $2,395

Donald Reddy, president of the firm, said the ad was extremely effective in generating a small but steady flow of highly qualified sales leads.

4. Give the reader useful information.

One way to increase readership is to promise the reader useful information in your headline, then deliver it in your ad copy.

For an ad offering business people a book on how to collect overdue bills, Milt Pierce wrote this headline:

7 WAYS TO COLLECT YOUR

UNPAID BILLS.

New from Dow Jones-Irwin...

A Successful and Proven Way

to Get Your Bills Paid Faster.

The information-type ad is highly effective in business-to-business advertising. Why? Because the reason business people read trade journals is for

information, not entertainment, and such ads contribute to that valuable store of data.

5. Offer a free booklet, brochure, or information kit.

Offering something tangible – a brochure, booklet, information kit, videotape, audiocassette, research report, checklist, or other material the reader can send for – has never failed to increase response for me in nearly a decade of ad writing.

At the end of your ad, put in a subhead offering the material (for example: "Get the facts - FREE!"). Then describe your brochure or booklet, show a picture of it, and explain what the reader must do to get it.

If you can add something to a sales brochure to make it of lasting value, so much the better. More people will request your piece and more people will keep it.

6. Use a coupon.

Coupons visually identify your ad as "direct response," causing more people to stop and read it (because they know that coupon ads usually offer free things of value). If the ad is one-third page or less, put a dashed border around the entire ad to create the feel and appearance of a coupon. Copy then instructs the reader. "For more information, clip this ad and mail with your business card to {company name, address}."

7. Use a headline with multiple parts:

A headline does not have to contain just one sentence or phrase set in one uniform type size. Often, you can create a more eye catching and effective headline using what is essentially a three-part headline.

The first part, or kicker, is an "eyebrow" or short line that goes in the upper left corner of the ad, either straight or at a slant. One good use of the kicker is to select a specific type of reader for the ad (e.g., "Attention COBOL Programmers").

Another effective technique is to let the reader know you are offering something free ("Special Free Offer - See Coupon Below").

Next, set in larger type, comes your mail headline, which states your central benefit or makes a powerful promise. Then, in the subhead, you expand on the benefit or reveal the specific nature of the promise. Examples:

$500 A DAY WRITER'S UTOPIA

Here's the breakthrough offer that opens

up a whole new world for writers or those

who hope to become writers:

FOR HIGH SPEED HIGH PERFORMANCE

DATA INTEGRATION, LOOK INTO MAGIC

MIRROR. Now you can move data instantly from

one program to another right from your PC screen.

If your headline is designed to arouse curiosity or grab attention and does so at the expense of clarity, then be sure to make the nature of your proposition immediately clear in a subhead or within the first sentence. Otherwise you will lose the interest of the reader whose attention you worked so hard to gain.

Section 9

How to Write More Effective Product Brochures

When I was the advertising manager for a process equipment manufacturer, one of my responsibilities was to serve as liaison between the

advertising agency we hired to write our ads and product brochures and our staff engineers.

The engineers, because of their technical expertise in the subject matter, were responsible for reviewing the agency's work.

As is often the case in our industry, the engineers complained that those "ad types" at the agency didn't understand the product or the audience – and that their copy was way off base.

The agency countered that engineers may know technology but don't know writing, marketing, design, or selling – and that they wanted to cram the brochures with too much unnecessary detail that would dilute the sales message.

Who was right? The fact is, both arguments have some merit.

On the agency side, ad agency folk often have a flair for creative, colorful communication, which can help a brochure gain attention and be noticed.

On the other hand, clients – especially the engineers who review the agency's brochure copy – often complain, sometimes correctly, that the agency's brochure copy is superficial.

Laziness is often the cause. The writer did not do sufficient research to understand the technology and the needs, concerns, and interests of the target audience. The copy he writes reflects this lack of understanding. When you read it, you immediately think, "This person doesn't know what he is talking about" – and you are probably right.

Another problem with professional or agency-written product literature is a tendency toward cleverness for the sake of being clever. "Be creative!" the client instructs the agency. But the reader often doesn't get the joke, pun, or reference in the headline, the creativity goes over her head, and she is turned off rather than engaged.

Engineers who write their own brochure copy are rarely superficial; they usually have a solid understanding of the product and its technology. However, engineers tend to assume that the reader knows as much as the writer, speaks the same jargon, and has the same level of interest in the technology. And often this is not the case.

Take jargon. People today frequently use the term "open systems architecture" in sales literature. But do they really know what this means? Write down your own definition, ask five colleagues to do the same, and compare. I guarantee they will not be the same. Engineers who write often don't strive for clarity. So they fall back on buzzwords and clichés that, unfortunately, don't get across the messages they wish to convey.

Given these conditions, how can you – as an engineer or manager, who either writes brochure copy, edits copy, approves copy, or provides input for ad agencies or freelance industrial copywriters – do your job better so the finished brochure is the best one possible?

Here are some simple guidelines to follow:

1. *Define the topic.* Is your brochure about a solution? A system? A product line? A product? A specific model of that product? A specific industry use or application of that product? The support services you offer for that product? The accessories?

Define what the piece is about. The narrower the topic, the more focused, specific, and effective your brochure can be within the limited space available.

Tip: Your brochure doesn't have to cover everything. You can always decide to have other pieces of sales literature that go into more depth on certain aspects of the product.

For instance, you can talk about satisfied users in case histories. You can expand on specifications in a spec sheet. Some marketers use application briefs to

focus on a specific application or industry. Others develop separate sell sheets on each key feature, allowing more in-depth technical discussion than is possible in a general product brochure.

2. *Know your audience.* Are you writing to engineers or managers? The former may be interested in technical and performance specifications. The latter may want to know about support, service, ease of use, scalability, and user benefits, or return on investment.

If you are writing to engineers, are they well-versed in this particular technology? Or do you have to bring them up to speed? Just because someone is a chemical engineer does not mean they know nearly as much about industrial knives, turbine blades, corrosion-resistant metals, ball valves, or your particular specialty as you do. Indeed, they probably don't.

When in doubt, it is better to explain so everyone understands than to assume that everyone already understands. No engineer has ever complained to me that a brochure I wrote was too clear.

3. *Write with your objective in mind.* Unlike a Victoria Secrets catalog, which gives the buyer all the information she needs to place an order, most technical product brochures support the selling process but are not designed to complete it on their own.

Is the objective of the brochure to convince the prospect that your technical design is superior to your competition? Or show that you have more features at a better price? Or demonstrate that your system will pay back its cost in less than 6 months?

Establish a communication objective for the brochure and write with that goal in mind. For instance, if the objective is to get a meeting for you to sell consulting services to the client, you only need to include enough to convince them that the meeting is worth their time. Anything more is probably overkill.

4. *Include the two things every brochure should contain.* These simply are (a) the things your prospects need and want to know about your product to make their buying decision and (b) what you think you should say to persuade them that your product is the best product choice – and your company is the best vendor.

The things a prospect wants to know about an industrial product might include weight, dimensions, power requirements, operating temperature, and whether it can perform certain functions.

Things you might want to tell them include how the performance compares with competitive systems in benchmark tests (if you were the winner, of course) or the fact that it was cited as "Best Product" by an industry publication, or won an award from a trade association, or is the most popular product in its category with an installed base of more than 10,000 units.

5. *Be selective.* While ad agency copy is sometimes too light and tells the reader too little, engineer copy often makes the opposite error, attempting to cram every last technical fact and feature into a four or eight page brochure.

Keep in mind that your prospect is bombarded by more information than he can handle on a daily basis. Everyone has too much to read, and not enough time to read it. According to a study by the School of Information Management & Systems at UC Berkeley, each year the human race produces about 1.5 exabytes of unique information in print, film, optical, and magnetic content worldwide — roughly 250MB of new information for every man, women, and child.

Be selective in your presentation. Copywriter Herschell Gordon Lewis has a formula, $E^2 = 0$. Or as Lewis says, "When you emphasize everything, you emphasize nothing." If every fact about your product is given equal weight in the

brochure, the key facts that make the most persuasive case for buying the product will not stand out.

6. *Understand the selling environment.* There are three basic selling situations for process equipment, chemicals, and other industrial products. You must know what situation your product falls into, so you can market it effectively.

The first situation is that the prospect is not acutely aware of the problem he has that your product can solve. Or he is aware of it but does not consider it a priority. In this situation, to get your prospect's attention, your brochure must dramatize the problem and its severity, and then position your product as the solution.

Example: Mainframe computer operators did not realize that certain operations accidentally overrode and erased files stored on magnetic tapes. A brochure for a utility that prevented this operation from occurring began, "Did you know that your storage devices may be accidentally wiping out important files even as you read this sentence?" It alerted them to the problem in a dramatic way.

Once alerted to a problem they didn't know existed, the readers were eager to find a solution, which the utility handily provided. Sales were brisk.

The second situation is that the prospect is aware of the problem or need your product addresses, but is not at all convinced that your type of product is the best solution.

Example: A chemical manufacturer warned wastewater treatment plants that their current activated charcoal bed systems were too costly.

The plant managers believed that, but didn't believe that the manufacturer's alternative filter technology was a viable solution. A paper

reprinting lab test results plus the offer of a free trial overcame the disbelief and got firms to use the new filter system.

The third situation is when the prospect knows what his problem is, believes your type of product is the right solution, but needs to be convinced that your product is the best choice in the category, and better than similar products offered by your competitors.

One way to demonstrate superiority is with a table comparing your product with the others on a feature by feature basis. If you have a more complete feature set than they do, such a table makes you look like the best choice.

Another technique is to give specifications that prove your performance is superior. If this cannot be quantitatively measured, talk about any unique functionality, technology, or design feature that might create an impression of superiority in the prospect's mind.

There are many other copywriting techniques available to produce a superior technical product brochure in any of these three situations; this is why I've devoted the past 20 years, my entire professional life, to practicing and studying copywriting – just like an engineer practices and studies his specialty.

But if you follow the basics in this article and do nothing else, I guarantee an improvement in your brochures that you, your sales reps, and your customers will appreciate. You might even some day receive that rare compliment: "You know, I actually read your brochure. It wasn't boring, and it told me what I needed to know!"

About the author:

BOB BLY is an independent copywriter and consultant with more than 20 years of experience in business-to-business, high tech, industrial, and direct marketing.

Bob has written copy for over 100 clients including Network Solutions, ITT Fluid Technology, Medical Economics, Intuit, Business & Legal Reports, and Brooklyn Union Gas. Awards include a Gold Echo from the Direct Marketing Association, an IMMY from the Information Industry Association, two Southstar Awards, an American Corporate Identity Award of Excellence, and the Standard of Excellence award from the Web Marketing Association.

He is the author of more than 50 books including *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Direct Marketing* (Alpha Books) and *The Copywriter's Handbook* (Henry Holt & Co.). His articles have appeared in numerous publications such as *DM News, Writer's Digest, Amtrak Express, Cosmopolitan, Inside Direct Mail*, and *Bits & Pieces for Salespeople.*

Bob has presented marketing, sales, and writing seminars for such groups as the U.S. Army, Independent Laboratory Distributors Association, American Institute of Chemical Engineers, and the American Marketing Association.

He also taught business-to-business copywriting and technical writing at New York University.

Bob writes sales letters, direct mail packages, ads, e-mail marketing campaigns, brochures, articles, press releases, white papers, Web sites, newsletters, scripts, and other marketing materials clients need to sell their products and services to businesses. He also consults with clients on marketing strategy, mail order selling, and lead generation programs.

Prior to becoming an independent copywriter and consultant, Bob was advertising manager for Koch Engineering, a manufacturer of process equipment. He has also worked as a marketing communications writer for Westinghouse Defense. Bob Bly holds a B.S. in chemical engineering from the University of Rochester and has been trained as a Certified Novell Administrator (CNA). He is a member of the American Institute of Chemical Engineers and the Business Marketing Association.

Bob has appeared as a guest on dozens of TV and radio shows including MoneyTalk 1350, The Advertising Show, Bernard Meltzer, Bill Bresnan, CNBC, Winning in Business, The Small Business Advocate and CBS Hard Copy. He has been featured in major media ranging from the LA Times and Nation's Business to the New York Post and the National Enquirer.

For a FREE Copywriting Information Kit, or a free, no-obligation cost estimate on copywriting for your next project, contact:

Bob Bly, Copywriter

22 East Quackenbush Avenue, 3rd Floor, Dumont, NJ 07628

Phone (201) 385-1220, Fax (201) 385-1138

Email: rwbly@bly.com

Web: www.bly.com