



Nine steps to getting great work from a copywriter

Starting with a writer is like having a first date

afia we help companies sound more human

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Some of the things we've learnt over the last ten years:

- How to write a brief that'll inspire
- How to make sure you don't pay over the odds
- How to make sure things happen to deadline
- How to make sign-off quick and painless
- What to do if the tone isn't quite right

Starting with a writer is having a first date.

Sweaty palms. Awkward silences. And no one's quite sure what to expect from the other.

It's a daunting project, asking in someone who knows almost nothing about your company. How can they expect to write your main website or sensitive customer letters? And what do you need to give them to do it?

1 step

Start with the brief

The best way to get started is with a bit of writing yourself: the brief.

A copywriter needs two things from you: information and inspiration. The first is straightforward, and the second comes from your excitement about your brand.

And they both come from your brief. Writing it down gives your writer somewhere to start, and gets the project clear in your own mind. And keep it short – two or three pages at the most:

- What are they writing?
- Why are they writing it?
- Who's going to be reading it? How will they feel after they read it?
- Are there any other specifics?

Run it past someone else involved in the project: if they misunderstand it, so will your writer. Once it's done, drop it across together with any other background info: page layouts, previous writing, brand guidelines and so on – but only if they're relevant.

2 step

Decide who's signing off

In general, the more people you involve, the more changes you'll make. Changes take time and money, so keep it to the people you really need to be involved.

There are two main roles:

The sponsor: whoever holds the budget, and normally signs the project off. They'll have approved the brief and, ideally, be at the briefing session. Changing your brief later slows things down and costs more.

The approvers: the people who'll help you check all the information's correct, but don't need to sign off the brief or the finished work. They could be your brand team, legal advisers and the people who are really good at spotting errors.

3 step

Get together

Start with a face-to-face meeting – it helps you both get a feel for what it's going to be like to work with each other. Ask the approvers and sponsors, and plan for at least an hour, depending on the project size, to save time later on in the project.

Plan for some tricky questions and expect to go into things in some depth. We've never seen a company that's got great results from: 'We need something about blah, because this space needs filling. Whatever you think should be fine.' But when they've taken the time to spend a whole day with us – looking at products, talking to product managers and getting a feel for the brand – things have gone swimmingly.

You can expect your writer to steer the meeting. Bring along any materials or visuals that will help them, and plan to go through your written brief and fill in background details.

4 step

Agree the cost

Writers normally tot up how long they expect a job to take them, add on some time for briefing and amends and then multiply it by their day rate. They'll give you a quote before the briefing so you can budget and, if a job runs over, they won't charge you extra.

Some writers do things differently, so make sure you always check the price includes:

- all meetings and travel
- sample copy
- the full first draft
- edits and amends (normally two rounds)

If there's any more work involved, we'll usually estimate at the start and then update once the project starts – but that's normally for really big projects where neither you nor your writer can tell exactly how much work there's going to be. This means that your writer can adjust the amount later – but they should give you plenty of notice if this happens.

This is a plat du jour, though, not an 'all you can eat'. The cost includes everything in the brief - but if you start adding more things or changing the brief, you'll have to pay for the extra time. That's why it's so important to get your sponsor and approvers to buy into the brief at the start.

5 step

Find the right tone

If you've got a specific company writing style or guidelines – or any brand personality guidelines – make sure to hand them over. They'll be a good starting point, and your writer can use them to get the tone spot on for the job. (If you don't know what your brand personality is, talk to your brand team or give us a call.)

But for some jobs, the biggest challenge is getting the tone right – after that the words flow quickly. If you're not sure how you want to sound, your writer will be happy to offer some advice. It's not always easy to imagine what this means without seeing some examples, so don't be afraid to ask for some sample copy in different styles. Then you can get to grips with some real writing, see which versions you like the feel of, and use this to decide how the final version should sound.

Once you've found your tone, stick to it.

When you update your tone of voice, you also need to change every piece of written material that leaves your building or circulates around it. If you leave half your material in your old style, and change the other half to the new tone of voice, you'll start to come over as a little odd. As if your kindly aunt suddenly started to yell at you like a boxing coach.

If your tone of voice isn't clear, you could end up with different writers using a variety of styles. Not good.

6 step

Set a deadline

Zola had a phrase about 'forging one's style on the terrible anvil of daily deadlines.' Which is Zola's way of saying, 'Don't rush your writer if you want a good job.' You need to be realistic when you're drawing up a schedule.

A good start is to work back from the deadline to make sure you've got enough time for your writer to absorb the brief, write sample copy if you need it, come back to you with questions, finish the first draft and make any changes.

The other thing you need to be realistic about when you're setting a deadline is leaving enough time to read everything yourself, and to collect suggested changes from everyone else who's involved. If you keep your writer waiting a week for your feedback, they'll never hit your 'six days' time' deadline. The smoothest sign-offs are when you've time built in for feedback with everyone who needs to be involved.

And then you're away!

7 step

Stay on call

You'll get the best results from your writer if you're there to answer questions. Even with the world's most thorough brief, there will always be a few points that crop up while your writer's working, so make sure you're around to answer them.

- Encourage them to contact you as they're writing, if they need to.
- Reply as quickly as you can.
- Be honest when you're giving feedback – they'll appreciate it.

This doesn't mean you'll be badgered throughout the day – it just means that you're there to answer the odd question as it crops up

8 step

Make useful changes

It's rare for a first draft to hit the nail completely on the head. As you read through, you'll probably come across a couple of bits that just don't sound right. Explain this clearly to your writer – it's the key to getting the job done perfectly.

On the whole, you're looking at two things when you give feedback – content and

style. You know the project back to front, so if the content's wrong it should jump out at you, or to your approvers, brand managers or experts. Is everything there that you need to say? Can you take out the things that are getting in the way? Things that may be important to you but aren't to your readers?

Style is trickier. If you have tone of voice guidelines or a style guide, that's a good yardstick to start with. If not, try to explain why a certain section isn't working, rather than just changing it. Is it too stuffy? Too matey? Does it sound amateurish? Or does it pile on too much gloss?

Be precise when you give your feedback.

If there's more than one person signing a project off, you'll need to manage the feedback. That means someone in your business to make sense of comments that – occasionally – are completely opposite.

So if your internal comms team say 'It's too matey' and your brand team say 'It's too stuffy', you can't just throw both comments back at your writer. Someone – normally the project sponsor – needs to make a decision and send across a single version of the document that combines this feedback and gives clear direction to the writer.

If you just say 'Well, it's nearly there, can you just give it another go?' You're on the road to 17 rewrites and quadrupling your budget.

But if you tell your writer, 'I need it to sound warmer, take out the section on our relationship with our retailers, and never use the word 'synergy' because the CEO hates it,' you'll get back what you need.

9

step

Wrap up the job

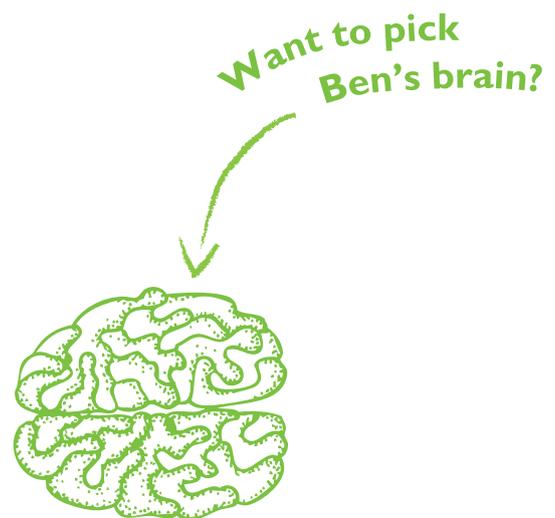
Once the work is signed off, you may think the job is finished. But it's not.

Good writers are worth keeping hold of, so take a couple of minutes to drop them a line with any feedback – good or bad. They'll appreciate it, and it'll help things run even smoother next time you work with them. Once you've built up a good relationship with a reliable writer, or a whole team, you can cut the amount of time you spend auditioning new ones.

The end

So now you can see yourself looking at a screen or holding a piece of paper that has words on that you're really happy with. You're pleased with it, and so are your approvers, customers, managers, shareholders and everyone else who's going to read it.

That's the feeling we're aiming for. Great work, everyone. Now, what's next?



We help companies sound more human

When we talk to someone face-to-face, we instinctively know how to get on with them, don't we?

But when we sit down to write it somehow seems harder to be ourselves, or our brand.

We'll help your business use the right tone of voice to get and keep more customers.

And have more fun doing it.

We're always happy to get out from behind our desks. So if you'd like to meet up, get in touch with Ben Afia.

t: +44 (0)20 8166 4966
e: hello@afia.tv www.afia.tv