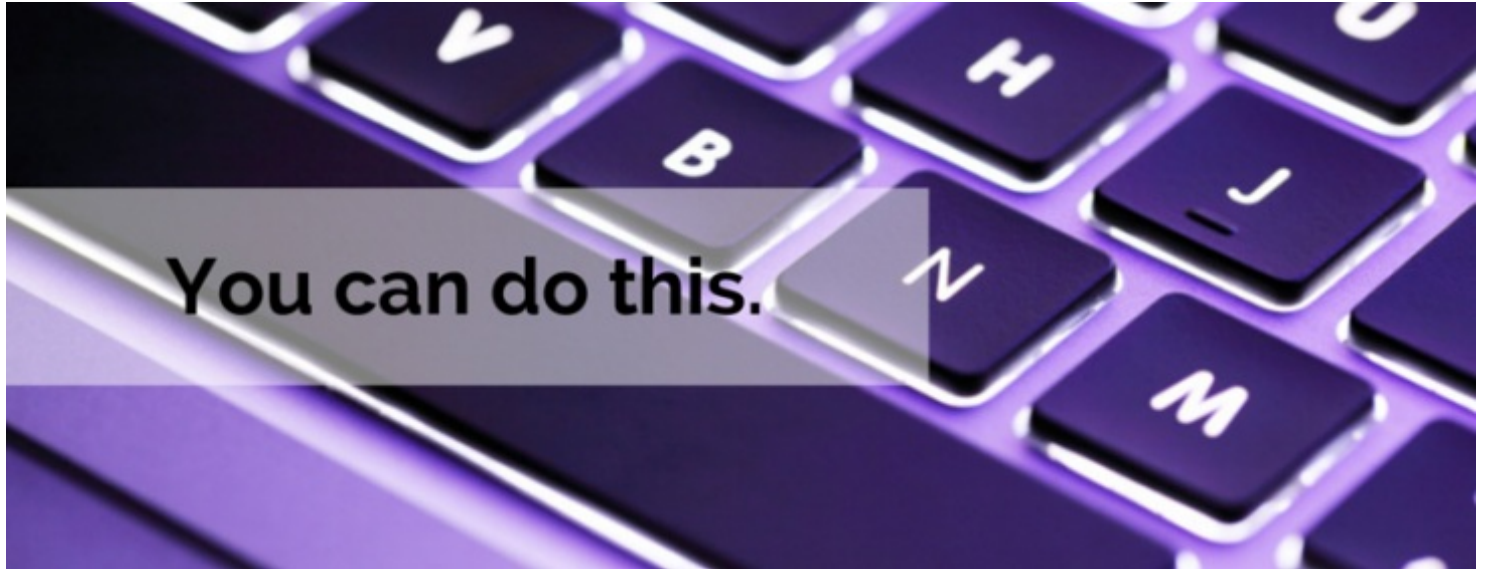


If you think you can't write, you're wrong: Copywriting tips for the novice blogger

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“I can't write.”

You've said it a zillion times, but you're not going to say it again because it's a giant, steamy, stinky pile of crap.

I know what your problem is.

You learned how to write. Then you learned you were doing it wrong.

Blame it on your teachers. Or the man. Or the system. Or the business world. Let's agree to point the finger at some anonymous entity so you'll need not feel guilty about it or suffer any consequences.

The truth is you got off to a great start. In your early grade school years, you were merely expected to use legible penmanship and transfer your thoughts—any thoughts—to the paper.

You wrote with abandon. It was fun. It was freeing. But not for long. Your spirit got splintered and your passion shattered as you progressed through the grades. Out came the red pens. Your papers came back to you with corrections and suggestions for cleaning up your prose.

Like science and math, you learned writing has rules. Rules for where, when and how to apply the rules. The more rules you learned, the less writing became an exercise in self-expression.

Your involuntary responses to writing by the rules extinguish your impulses in an instant. Your willingness to follow a formula produces the same outcome every time: dreadful mediocrity.

Your pen's perfectly powerless. You're a cripple at the keyboard. The wild, wonderful, ambitious and creative ideas that spring from your mind never get anywhere near your fingertips.

You have so much to unlearn.

Write.

That's right. Write something. Anything. It might be awful. It could be truly amateurish. It doesn't matter. Write. Right now.

Let me talk you through this, a fictitious, but real enactment. I've done it many times before and it usually goes something like this...

I ask the obvious question, "What's the problem?"

I get the obvious answer, "*I don't know where to start.*"

Next question: "What are you trying to say?"

Next answer: "*Well, we're hosting an event, so I want to tell the prospects who have indicated some interest in our solution the value of attending. They'll learn a lot and it won't cost a dime.*"

My turn: "Well, there you go. That's great. Write that down."

Response: "*Write what down?*"

"Write what you just told me. It sounded pretty good."

"*Seriously?*"

"Seriously."

You're out of order

You came in search of the prescription for this writing disorder of yours and the big secret I offer you is "write?" It sounds kind of lame.

Maybe you take me for a poser now. Not so fast my friend.

Am I telling you the secret to becoming a writer is simply "start writing?" No, I'm not. However, I'm telling you what your biggest problem is.

You're going about this backwards. You're doing the tasks in the wrong order. Writers write first and edit after.

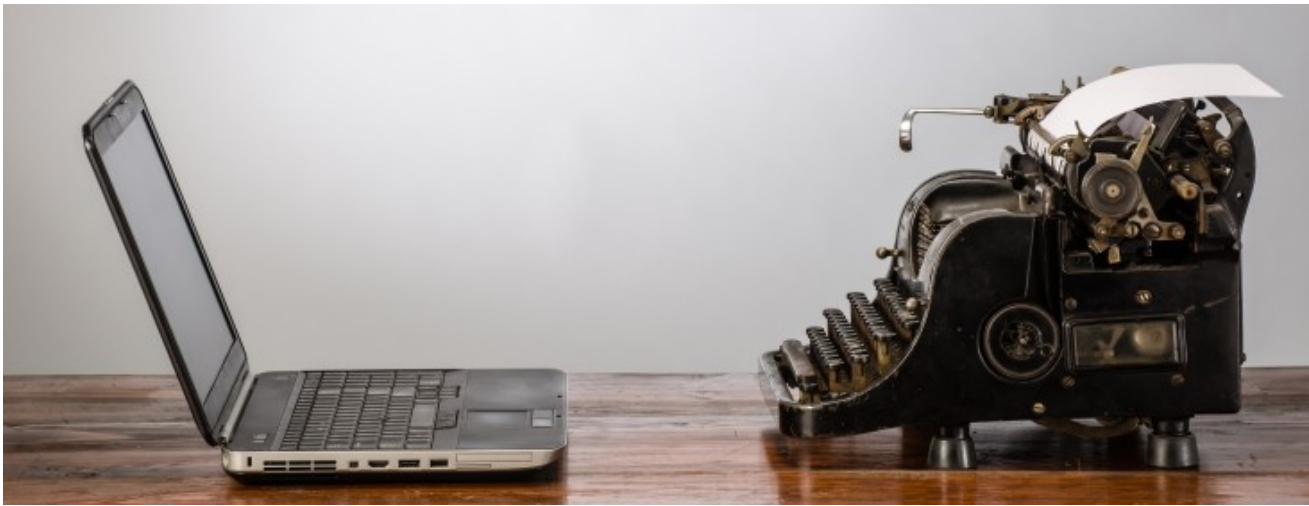
When you stare for hours at a blank page while each tick of the clock gets progressively louder and the sweat starts to pour, what you're really doing is editing.

The thoughts aren't getting transferred to the page because there's an editor in your head telling you "this stinks." And it probably does. Let it stink.

Your lack of experience has you obsessing with details when you shouldn't be. You're trying to fix your work before there's any work to fix. You're hunting for flaws.

If you're going to be an editor and a writer at the same time, your page could remain blank for all eternity.

If you can't write, your foremost foe is perfection paralysis. You need to slay that nasty beast.



The hardest part of every task is starting

“The first draft of anything is shit.” — Ernest Hemingway

You started. Look at the page now. It’s not blank. You should feel quite a bit better. Now stop looking at it and get back to work. Put the next thought down and then the next. Keep going until they’re all there in all their smelly glory.

Of course, you’re not going to publish, share or sign the thing yet. It’s a first draft. Now you’re going to edit.

Welcome to the writing process.

Iteration is liberation

If you think you’re reading the first draft of this manuscript, think again. I wrote it then I edited it. Then I edited again.

Writing is an iterative process. When you arrive at the point where you run out of ideas for improving what you wrote, you’re done. It may not ever be perfect, but you’re going to make it better with each pass thanks to the magic key: delete.

All writers depend on striking, deleting, backspacing—some form of cutting. Prolific writers get used to pruning their prose. It’s a skill that takes practice, to be sure. Sometimes there’s pain associated with dispatching your babies to the trash can. But this is the way it works.

In your journey as a writer you’ll come to know other writers and talk about your craft. I can assure you you’ll never hear any accomplished writer deny their drafts become more solid when they slash and trash.

Realizing this is endlessly liberating. You need to feel free to barf ideas on the page. Make a glorious mess to get started. Clean it up to get it done.

12 tips to help you delete, edit and improve your writing

1. Cut “that” out

I can always spot an unprofessional writer by the repetitive and unnecessary use of “this,” “that,” and “these.” A specific pet peeve of mine is finding them as the first word of sentence.

When you review your drafts, remove every instance of these (that) you can. See what I mean?

2. Break up long sentences

Long sentences run the risk of losing your reader. When you put several ideas in one sentence, break them up into separate sentences. If you spot a comma-heavy sentence, try to give each idea its own sentence.

3. Reduce redundancies

Get to the point by avoiding redundancies such as “violent explosion” or “new beginner.”

4. Lose the nothing phrases

“In order to...” and “needless to say” are two examples of common phrases that add nothing to your story. Find phrases that are simply filler and axe them.

5. 86 “very” and “really”

“Very” and “really” are really very useless words.

6. Purge the passive voice

Your writing gets dull when you employ passive phrases such as “It become known to me.” Go with an active voice. “I discovered...”

7. Use power verbs

First drafts tend to include many wimpy verbs. Make it a point to replace common verbs such as “get” with less common and more powerful verbs such as “seize” or “command.”

Look at my word choice above. “Use” is predictable and boring. Would “Choose” or “Employ” or “Apply” pumped up the prose? Notice every subhead in this list begins with an action.

8. Refer to people as “who”

Barry is the guy that can help you with your editing. “Who” is how you refer to someone. Correction: Barry is “who” you need to help you with your editing. Improvement: Barry will help you with your editing.

9. Avoid the “today stamp”

“Currently” is a stinker. “Nowadays” is too. Starting off with “Today” or “In today’s...” are other meaningless throw-aways.

10. Eliminate “there is” or “there are” at the beginning of sentences

There are lots of ways to start your sentences more interestingly than “there is” or “there are.” Start your sentences with a bang.

11. Let’s get friendly

Let us become friends. Let’s become friends. Let’s get friendly. I believe contractions make your writing more friendly and familiar. And, of course, striking forms of “be” tends to liven up the copy.

12. Steer clear of the -ing trap

“We were starting to ...” Whenever you see an “ing” in your copy, you can probably improve the line. “We started” is a more exciting way to start.

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