

A Copywriting Catechism

Peter B. Orlik

Hundreds of postulates and prohibitions regarding the practice of continuity writing have been set into stone. So when it comes time to "curricularize" the subject, it is easy to be intimidated by a litany of do's and don'ts that can overwhelm the teaching (not to mention the learning) process. In the exhortation that follows, therefore, my aim is to factor copywriting down to its fewest possible essentials and to suggest some methods for crusading on their behalf. Additional or alternative instructional liturgies may be employed but it should be the sacred mission of all born-again wordsmiths that students of every curricular denomination learn a gospel that spans the following continuity commandments.

Keep holy spelling and typing

Continuity writers are professional communicators and professional communicators are expected to have a mastery of message form as well as content. Misspellings and typographical aberrations should be as little tolerated in a copywriter as fractured notes and faulty phrasing by a

musician. The most lyrical piece of persuasive psalmody will be hobbled if the appearance of the copy suggests that its creator either doesn't know enough or care enough about the craft to properly bestow its components on paper. It's not just that neatness counts. The absence of neatness kills — either by the failure of an announcer to read it properly or the refusal of a supervisor or client to read it at all.

Speediness is next to godliness

The poet or playwright's leisurely contemplation is unknown to the copywriter whose typical hour of tribulation may consist of two or even three simultaneous assignments with common reckoning times of one hour from now. Broadcast deadlines have all the flexibility of Holy Writ and penalties for violating either are severe. Every copywriter is immersed in the purgatory of the quality/quantity squeeze: required to outdo herself or himself on each and every assignment and to accomplish that outdoing by the appointed time. Time spent making this morning's assignment more noble will only put this afternoon's assignment farther behind the clock's grim

scrutiny. The continuity creator, in short, must constantly trek toward a salvation that is always just beyond the task after next.

Thou shalt not always be creative

The unbending time pressures on the broadcast copywriter make continuous creativity a bit less likely than coffee break partings of the Red Sea. Genuine creativity is defined as the forging of a logical link twixt two previously unattached subjects. It can seldom be achieved in haste. That a great multitude of broadcast messages are not creative neither damns them nor their progenitors. Time and tide wait for nothing — including creativity — and the writer who delays an assignment until a really creative approach begets itself may be thrust into the desert of unemployment long before the begetting is begotten.

Fortunately, the majority of copy assignments require not creativity but craftsmanship; a clear, straightforward telling of the subject's story without unseemly frivolity or forked tongue. If even a half-dozen announcements meeting our definition of creativity are found in an entire evening's listening or viewing, one has witnessed a near miracle. But a parallel chronicling of effectively engaging spots from the same time period will dramatically demonstrate that messages need not be creative to communicate reliably. Forced creativity in fact, can do much more violence to message realization than can the clock's demonic tyranny.

To thine own work pattern be true

Laboring in the sweaty vineyards of short-deadlined assignments, copywriters can approach a new task in one of two ways. Either can bear the same fruit, providing that the writer understands the method for harvesting bountiful ideas he or she utilizes — and proceeds accordingly.

The greater host of writers, when afflicted with a new task, take this burden to the typewriter and quickly begin to turn white paper black. Nothing scares these Type A wordsmiths more than the *tabula rasa* of stark parchment and every effort is made to transfigure it as quickly as

possible. There is nothing sinful about such an approach as long as the Type A disciple realizes that he or she is warming up on paper; that the first several words and sentences are doing no more than getting up to speed and face-to-face with the assignment's true character. Usually, the rightful beginning of the Type A's message is entombed in the middle or near the end of this first frenetic effort, waiting to be unearthed in the second draft genesis of the real communication for which the assignment hungers.

Conversely, the much smaller tribe of Type B writers is far less horrified by the specter of virgin paper than by the slaughter of already-set-down words. These scribes prefer to meditate, sculpting and resculpting the concept within the tabernacle of their own minds, until it has been properly purified. Type B's first draft is never seen by mortals since it exists solely as mental contemplation. But when Type B does set words to paper, they are probably in submittable form. This brand of writer needs to be reassured that he or she need not violate a clean piece of paper to be engaged in the process of writing.

Fear ye not criticism

Writers from both tribes detest criticism even though business realities make outside judging essential to the commercial cleansing of their copy. So copycrafters need to erect a metaphysical wall between themselves and their scripts; need to recognize that a negative script pronouncement is not a rejection of their total being. The wordsmith who takes each adjective quarrel or syntactic slam as a personal affront will not long survive in an industry in which every piece of writing is fair game for criticism by everyone. Besides, in learning to adjust to valid objections and to detect as well as deflect invalid ones, the craft of copywriting becomes more finely honed. Through such mortification comes not just a better writer, but a potential supervisor of other writers.

Covet conversationality

The spiritual force behind effective

broadcast communication is conversationality — a sublime feeling in each listener or viewer that the epistle is flowing directly to him. Television is at its best when it stimulates a sense of one-to-one communion; and radio can't even survive without this attribute. True, all broadcast continuity must talk to the multitudes but the multitudes should never be able to discern that. Instead, each member of the broadcast audience should get the impression that he or she is being singly conversed with or, in the case of dialogue spots, singly overhearing a believable interchange between two other flesh and blood beings.

To define is divine

The difference between such valued conversation and idle chatter is that conversation has a point to make and paints a compelling portrait directly relevant to it. No time is wasted in bestowing interesting and pertinent knowledge on conversation participants and eavesdroppers alike. For the copywriter, this means that the subject of the message should be made manifest in the most tangible means possible. Listeners or viewers must know what it looks like, what it's called, what it does and where to get it. They must be led to see the product or service *in use* and all this adds up to proper definition. Like any engaging homily, a vibrant piece of continuity will give the audience a concrete picture in the very first sentence and then proceed to demonstrate the truth of its theme by amplifying that picture.

Forget not enlightened self-interest

The most miraculous of definitions will seem largely ephemeral if their subjects do not impinge on the listener or viewer's life. Members of the broadcast audience must be able to visualize themselves in the copy-painted picture; be permitted to see their own problems and plagues being absolved by the solution the copy portrays. The consumer's self-interest and gratification that derives from the application of a commercial product is relatively easy to comprehend even if it does not always

translate into the most heaven-sent prose. But public service causes and station recognition crusades require more intense contemplation if they are to glorify audience rather than client goals. This is where enlightenment comes in. Most mortals like to do the "right" thing as long as the doing is not too inconvenient and provides an reward in the process. Helping Smokey the Bear resist new burning bushes is fine — as long as listeners are able to perceive the economic or recreational benefits to themselves. Canonizing your station as the number one place for news is great, but only if the viewer can relate such journalistic sanctity to the specific, life-coping assistances that better news brings.

Honor the role of seller

All broadcast writing is a selling covenant. It must proselytize on behalf of its client company or institution by the binding of audience interests to corporate objectives. It follows that the copywriter is always a salesperson, whether promoting urns of peanut butter or bushels of "stay tuned to's." The writer who remains convinced of this transcendent selling task will create copy that is sales oriented. It will speak directly and conversationally to the needs and wants of the client. Good salespeople don't pontificate, they explain. They seem to listen as much as they talk. They answer objections with reason rather than argument. So even when virtuous salesfolk don't win a convert initially, their helpful demeanor at least make the heathen willing to listen — both now and later. Effective broadcast copy exudes this same positive glow.

Respect well the marketplace

The copywriter's script is a marketplace handmaiden. It is beatified neither for its aesthetic contribution nor its syntactic elegance but for its talent to sell and be sold. It must satisfy a casual audience and an anything-but-casual client. Whether written on behalf of a commercial product, a community cause or a station self-portrait, the most effective continuity straddles the crossroads where client data and audience interest intersect. Thus,

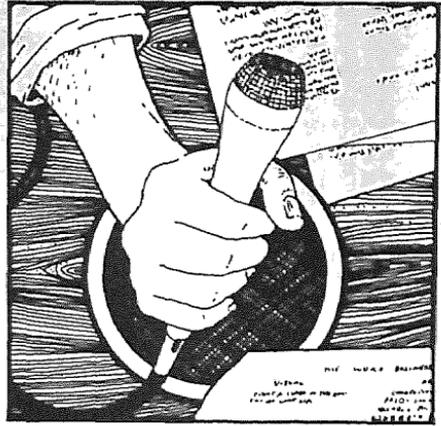
marketing strategy and positioning theory are as important a part of the writer's baggage as clever phrases and tempting apparitions. Today's broadcast writing must be business administration leavened with flair and broad-ranging cognizance of the tumultuous world into which each piece of copy is propelled.

No continuity class should disband before students have had an opportunity to plan and embody a unified broadcast campaign. Such a campaign should be supported by the pillars of client and competition analyses, positioning strategy, objective setting and sample announcement incarnation. Likewise, no graduating student should be cast into the darkness outside without some idea of his or her capacity to survive the slings and arrows of the copywriter's world. During the passage of the term, therefore, use a grading scale that reflects how appropriate the copy submitted is to the marketplace rather than the far gentler pastures of the campus. Any script that would blossom in an actual middle market setting can be adorned with an "A." Anything less should be regressively branded accordingly — yea, even down to the lowliest unfertilized seed. The ultimate judgment of the report card can be adjusted back to the comforting valley of the class curve later; but during the progression of the course itself, students have the advantage of always knowing how far their submitted work is from meeting the stern strictures of the professional media environment.

A final blessing

The copywriting professor who preaches these commandments will confer on his or her students a baptism of fire that makes admittance into stations and agencies less a miracle and more a birthright. The punishment for ignoring these tenets, on the other hand, can be eternal exile to the traffic department or announce booth. Surely, no blessed writer merits those reprobinations.

Peter B. Orlik is a professor of Broadcast & Cinematic Arts at Central Michigan University. He is the author of Broadcast Copywriting, 2nd ed. (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1982).



Relating Broadcast Writing to the Student

Phillip O. Keirstead

Teaching broadcast writing usually means that we have to modify everything our students have learned about writing. They have been taught to write essays, book reports and newspaper articles. Suddenly we ask them to write for the spoken word.

Our task is threefold. We must impart a sense of what broadcast writing should be, equip our students with the elements of broadcast writing style and reinforce the first two steps with heavy doses of practice.

Modified Language

Understanding why you do certain things is often as important as understanding how you accomplish the task. The student needs to understand that broadcast writing is a modified form of spoken language. The greatest barrier to understanding is that he or she hasn't listened to spoken language and so isn't quite certain of what we expect.

I start by likening broadcast writing to a telephone conversation with an older family member. The student quickly recalls that what one says on the telephone is not the same as what he or she writes for an English class. I then point out that we use different forms of speech in different situations. The colloquial language used in calling a friend — full of slang and shared