

Responsive Essay: To Why Copywriting Should be the Core Broadcast Writing Course

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This paper advances the contention that a required copywriting course should be the foundation writing experience for broadcast/telecommunications majors. Copywriting is advocated for this critical task because its ten "Cornerstone Attributes" efficiently provide essential insights into the electronic media scripting process.

When they enter our programs, the writing experience of most electronic media students has been print-based. Unfortunately, their secondary school English classes (with an occasional journalism or yearbook course thrown in) have conveyed the syntax and formatic conventions of writing for the eye rather than for the ear. Early on then, broadcast educators need to focus their students on the requisites of aural composition—if those students' audio messages and visual soundtracks are to resonate with electronic media audiences.

The chosen mechanism for the writing instruction of electronic media majors varies from campus to campus. Some units require a broad-ranging *Writing for Mass Media* course that covers a wide variety of genres for both print and electronic media. Other journalism-based programs utilize a news writing class. Still others rely on the English department to provide universal writing training for their majors with electronic media writing treated solely in elective offerings.

In contrast, Central Michigan University's Broadcast & Cinematic Arts Department has determined that an electronic media copywriting course (BCA 311) is the most effective and efficient way to introduce students to aural-oriented scripting. As defined in the *Central Michigan University Bulletin*, the class emphasizes "Practice in the pervasive short forms of audio and video writing: commercials, continuity, public service announcements, and campaign evolution" (CMU 1999-2000 *Bulletin*, p. 254). Required of every BCA major and minor, BCA 311 (*Broadcast and Cable Copywriting*), is also a mandated component of the new interdisciplinary Integrated Public Relations curriculum. The copywriting course has been assigned this prominent role because of that class's 10 Cornerstone Attributes—characteristics that address the essence of audio/visual composition.

THE 10 ATTRIBUTES

Persuasion Through Brevity

The spot's shortness demands immediate clarity and consistent conciseness if the message is to be completed before its quick curtain comes down. Copywriting is really the art of time-constricted storytelling. Its tales seldom exceed one minute. But once students have mastered the successful packaging of these 30 and 60 second pieces of persuasion, it is much easier for them to write effective multi-minute news packages, half-hour situation comedies, and even movie-length scripts. For instance, several of the situation comedy industry's most successful writers (from Joe Connelly and Bob Mosher, the creators of *Leave It to Beaver*—to *WKRP in Cincinnati*'s developer Hugh Wilson) began their careers as copywriters. Similarly, Chicago ad agency Fusion Idea Lab (source of award-winning Bud Light commercials) recently has partnered with Celluloid Studios in Santa Monica to jointly develop situation comedy projects. "If you can write an entertaining 30-second

spot," asserts Fashion co-founder Mike Oberman, "it's not such a giant leap to write a sitcom around it. A good idea is a good idea" (Jensen, 1999, p.25).

Radio Proving-Ground

Because our industry requires so much radio advertising to be created, the copywriting class is ideally suited to exploit the radio proving-ground where simplicity and clarity of language are essential; and where absence of these attributes is most noticeable. When accompanied by a dynamic picture, mediocre video writing may not be immediately obvious (particularly to students). But defects are unmistakable in an aural-only medium. As agency creative director Tom Monahan observes:

There is no place to hide in radio. Weak copy can't hide behind great design. In radio there's simply no place to hide anything. No place for the mistakes, the poor judgment, the weaknesses. Everything is right out there in front for all thirty or sixty seconds. (Monahan, 1994)

The student who has been taught how to write communicative radio continuity won't be at a loss in a video project when budgetary or conceptual limitations provide no pictorial extravaganza to cover up lame writing.

Job Pervasiveness

The generation of copy is the most prevalent writing job in our business. Unlike entertainment program scripts, which are the province of a comparatively few East or West Coast specialists, broadcast copy must be crafted by staffers at every radio and television station, most cable systems, and a wide variety of advertising agencies, public relations firms, networks, and public service entities. Therefore, the most likely writing position for a student upon graduation will be that of a copywriter or newswriter (the latter demanding the same attention to time-constrained storytelling in an era when consultants advocate news packages of 90 seconds or less). In addition, in an era of downsizing and consolidation, many on-air and sales jobs demand copywriting as a support skill. Thus, requiring a copywriting class of all students directly prepares them for what is likely to be at least a facet of their career-launching employment.

Format Practice

Copywriting is also an efficient way to teach and master diverse format styles, including emerging Internet protocols. The writing of several spots requires the practiced reproduction of a format template multiple times rather than just once as in an extended program script. And in the case of video, several short assignments can quickly explore different format conventions such as two-column, centered, or right-margin-narrator arrangements. In addition, the copywriting class inherently provides several opportunities for storyboard creation; a conceptual process that is also utilized in long-form animation and movie projects.

Punctuation Repurposing

Stylistically, copywriting is an uncompromising acid test of whether students really do understand the essence of aural conveyance. To successfully replicate speaking rather than reading, copy must replace the print-structured sentence and its grammatical components with the aural-oriented "thought unit" which may or may not constitute a grammatically complete sentence. This requires replacement of punctuation for the eye with that for the ear. The difference? Whereas print punctuation is direct communication

between sender and receiver, aural punctuation is communication with an intermediary. Certainly, ink (or graphite) and paper are interjected between the written communication's sender and receiver. But the punctuation symbols set down by the writer are the same symbols that the reader will perceive. In aural communication, conversely, these symbols are guidelines used by an intermediary to convert the written message back to the characteristics of speech. The ultimate receiver does not see the punctuation symbols but instead, experiences the intermediary's translation of these symbols into spoken syntax. These intermediaries may be called announcers, narrators, talent or actors. Whatever their title, they use broadcast punctuation marks in the same way that a vocalist or instrumentalist uses the musical score's style markings—as guidelines for the accurate arrangement and reproduction of organized sound. Therefore, copywriting is really narrative orchestration because the deft use of punctuation enables its little 30 or 60 second "compositions" to resonate with the same voicings that its writer/composer intended.

Conversational Styling

When skillfully employed, broadcast punctuation joins with word choice to promote definitive conversational style. Because copywriters must establish a new conversation and new or renewed styling with each brief script they write, copywriting can provide many more occasions to explore a variety of stylings than can a single program-length project. Students can complete multiple and divergent copy assignments in the time it would take them to write one program script. If the assignments are framed properly, they thereby can explore several different conversational modes and how best to suggest them on paper. Each product, non-profit organization, or station should have its own personality in order to stand out in the marketplace. Well-crafted copy definitively conveys this personality. And assignments requiring spots for many different product types help students to master a wide spectrum of personality conveyance.

Need For Speed

Copywriting is not just a search for concise and persuasive conversational styling, but a search that must be completed within unyielding and short-spaced time limits. Copy deadlines usually are not just expressed by a date—but by a particular hour or even minute on that date. And not infrequently, that date is today. "A copywriter," points out Professor Guy McCann, "must have a pragmatic inspiration when required and on schedule" (McCann, 1989, p.1). Practice in copy generation therefore helps harness writing power to meet temporal demands and pressures in whatever writing career the student later pursues. As former copywriters and current successful screenwriters Tom Parker and Jim Jennewein (*Richie Rich, Getting Even With Dad, The Flintstones*) testify:

Advertising was a terrific training ground. There are a lot of similarities. As copywriters, we were always working on deadlines and that's helped a lot because on a movie, between rewrites and polishes, your life is nothing but deadlines. (Sharkey, 1992)

Directed Definition

Copy assignments must not only be completed quickly, but the subject of the spot must be defined quickly within its text. Given its brevity, the commercial, promo or public service announcement is required to get attention immediately and speedily direct that attention toward the subject's essential characteristics. Accomplishing this definitional task in a message of a minute or less instills a conceptual discipline that beneficially transfers to the structuring and clarifying of news packages, program scenarios, and corporate training

or image productions. Radio copywriting assignments are especially valuable teaching tools in this regard. In television, as long as the camera is pointed at the product-in-use, the fundamental definitional task is automatically (if not necessarily persuasively) accomplished. On radio, however, there is no product-in-use, there is no subject or benefit picture, until these elements are captured via carefully chosen definitional words and supporting sounds.

Marketplace Orientation

Every piece of electronic media copy is selling something; whether it's a box of cereal, a political candidate, a non-profit cause, or a station or program. So copywriting practice sensitizes students to the commercial realities of writing for the industry as a whole and the marketplace forces to which even public broadcasters are subject. Each electronic media writer must identify "saleable" audience needs/preferences and delineate ways to address them, whether in the structuring of a news package, sitcom or movie concept. Writing in our field is seldom "art for art's sake"—and coping with copywriting's mandates hones a healthy appreciation of this fact. Marketplace orientation also entails an understanding of what it takes to write within a bureaucracy. Unlike poets, copywriters must function within multi-leveled enterprises in which a variety of forces shape, modify, approve or reject what one has written. These forces are most obvious in the copywriter's world. So it is easier to introduce the student to them in that context. Innoculated with this corporate orientation, the apprentice writer thus is better able to grapple with the equally frustrating organizational demons residing in long-form scripting venues such as newsrooms, public relations departments, and production studios.

Presentational Practice

Similarly, copywriting is the ideal environment to teach "pitching"—the persuasive communication of your ideas and scripts within a corporate environment. By learning how to sell their spots, storyboards, and campaigns to the class-as-client, students are acquiring an essential business skill that is a formal or informal part of every writing job. Pitching a story idea to a news editor or a program concept to a studio executive involves the same basic interpersonal skills and techniques as pitching a spot to a creative director or client. As copywriters-turned-screenwriters Parker and Jennewein describe it:

In advertising, you learn how to pitch your ideas to the creative director, then to the company you're creating the advertising for. Today, we'll get a script to rewrite. We have to figure out what we're going to do with it, then go back and pitch it back to them in 15 or 20 minutes. That's all the time we have to convince them. (Sharkey, 1992)

In other words, the basic process and duration of pitching is the same regardless of the length of the writing being pitched.

CONCLUSION

In summary, copywriting is not merely a self-standing genre but also a "boot camp" for long-form writers. The student who hasn't learned to master "broadcast" syntax in a 30 or 60 second spot, won't magically acquire this mastery when faced with composing a three-minute news piece, twenty-three-minute sitcom, or two hour movie. Copywriting's 10 Cornerstone Attributes provide the syntactic and experiential foundation upon which other forms of electronic media writing can be built. That is why Central Michigan's

Broadcast & Cinematic Arts Department utilizes copywriting as its required writing core class and makes it the prerequisite to courses in electronic media newswriting, scriptwriting, and promotion.

Of course, students need to be made aware that copywriting itself can constitute a satisfying (and lucrative) lifelong career. For copywriting positions entail a huge variety of assignments that allow--even force--writers quickly to tap into and exploit every facet of their past experiences and personal eccentricities. Copywriting, confesses creative director Steve Hayden, "is perhaps the only non-criminal activity that allows you to make a comfortable living off your character defects" (Cooper, 1995, p.27).

As educators, we recognize that writing fluency is vital in the development of competent professionals--and literate, functional citizens as well. Study and practice in copywriting serves both functions. Because, as agency executive Bob Cox points out, the copywriting craft "involves a knowledge of language, visual imagery and, most important, the human psyche. Much of this is instinctive, but the rest must be learned" (Cox, 1994, p. 22).

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