

How to transform your writing staff into a lead-generating, sales-driving powerhouse

**A special report for marketing and
content executives**

Executive Summary

Ever feel you have *too much* to juggle? **Marketing execs have never felt more stress.**

While you grapple with new media like chatbots and TikTok, you must still create traditional marketing materials like case studies and emails.

From web analytics to automated customer surveys, new tech tools pop up daily. Many are game changers. Still, having more tools to master eats up time and attention.

And the variety of tools and media creates another, tougher problem.

Your department's goal has always been clear, to you *and* your CEO: attract leads who'll boost company revenue by becoming customers, then fans. But with more levers to push, how do you choose the one with highest impact?

Arming your writers with new tools to connect with, persuade and move an audience can create measurable results for your business.

Your job today includes much more than creating copy, of course. Nevertheless, day after day language *still directly affects* the bottom line.

Words can make a shopper sign up for a free trial, hit the “Buy” button...or click away to another website. Language-based thinking shapes even visual media like videos.

For years, advertisers and language scholars have studied how words influence behavior. And they've shared useful tips. Now, armed with computerized data tools, researchers are producing even more insights.

This gives writers access to a growing body of **proven principles that underlie successful persuasion.**

Few universities teach these strategies, however. And few marketing writers utilize them today.

Nevertheless, **they're easily learnable** using time-tested methods of writing instruction now available through individual coaching and live and online classes outside of universities. **Tapping these resources will help your writers produce the tangible marketing results your company needs and set them—and you—apart from the competition.**

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Is Your Writing Staff Your Department's Biggest Asset?

As a marketing leader, you've always known **what your CEO wants most from your department: to boost company revenues by attracting more leads who become customers and then fans.**

Seems straightforward, right?

But, of course, marketing today is anything but straightforward.

You oversee a mind-boggling array of activities: from managing multiple media channels and advising on product development to mastering new tech that seems to come online daily. And each has potential to boost the bottom line.

When it comes to getting the results your CEO hopes for, here's the key question: **with all the levers you *might* push, how do you choose the one with highest impact?**

To find the answer, consider what a high-impact solution should look like.

It must be a marketing activity...

- **...that can directly affect revenue-generating processes like lead attraction, lead nurturing and customer-relationship building;**
- **...that hasn't yet achieved up to its potential;**
- **...and whose effectiveness you can maximize using a clear, practical process.**

So...does one facet of your operation meet all three criteria?

Absolutely.

You needn't look far for something that ticks all three boxes. It's your copy and content operation...your writing staff.

Let's examine the evidence.

Writing Can Connect with Customers and Move Them to Action

You may not think of your writing staff as a revenue-building powerhouse.

After all, this is the technology age. Data and automation are major problem solvers for your department. New data tools make it ever easier to direct messages to those most likely to be receptive.

But once data does its thing, which marketing function does the work of bringing in those leads? And converting them to buyers?

Writing is the marketing-budget item most often at your customer's fingertips, in your customer's ear and just a click away on phone and computer.

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Language is a primary bridge-builder for businesses, marketers agree.

In a survey of B2B tech companies, white papers and ebooks topped the list of lead-generation tools named by marketing officers, with 59% naming these content forms as top lead producers. By contrast, non-language strategies made it onto many fewer lists, with just 39% of execs listing “contact us” forms and 35% listing free software trials as highly effective lead generators, for example.¹

Words also go to work turning leads to buyers. Results-driven marketing requires providing “super relevant and super-practical content...on a regular basis,” says one agency head.²

And the revenue value of written marketing is high.

Depending on the business, 40% to 70% of leads aren’t ready to buy.³ But content and copy can change that status. **In one study, nurturing unready leads with helpful content moved them to the “buy” stage 20% faster, leading to a 50% jump in sales.**⁴

But wait. Won’t writing lose its power as algorithms and consumers’ preference for visuals take over the world?

Most marketing analysts say “no.”

Take SEO. Once upon a time, algorithms favored keyword stuffing. Now, though, high-quality writing wins.

“Google and other search engines have made it clear that they’ll love up the good stuff more than the regurgitated pabulum,” says digital-marketing expert Ann Handley.⁵

And language-based thinking will remain the basis for most visual content, like videos or SlideShare presentations that begin life as scripts, or infographics that knit graphics, data and text together.⁶

Overlooked and Undervalued, Writing Underachieves

Okay, so writing can be a go-to tool for revenue-building actions like converting leads to buyers.

But is written marketing really a high-impact revenue booster? And if writing already does so many jobs, how can it be performing below its potential?

In fact, written marketing material consistently underperforms. And that happens for one big reason, analysts say. Businesses neglect it and undervalue its capabilities.

“The majority of enterprise content does nothing for the intended audience,” says Content Marketing Institute founder Joe Pulizzi.⁷

“Many of us are littering the landscape with content crap,” says Ann Handley. That’s because businesses routinely “neglect or overlook words,” despite their value.⁸

To see that writing is neglected and undervalued, look no further than the goals marketers set for it, says Wharton professor of marketing J. Scott Armstrong. Not just a few but many companies set the bar far too low for what copy should achieve. And those low goals effectively limit what their copy *will* achieve.

In one survey, 73% of businesses named “being likeable” as a top objective for their ads. But “it makes no sense to use likeability as an objective,” Armstrong says. Likeability accomplishes no business goals at all.⁹

The same goes for “awareness,” frequently named as a copy or content goal. “Every time I see a creative brief with the primary objective of ‘awareness,’ I know that time and money are about to be wasted,” says one marketing consultant.¹⁰

Such soft aims don’t increase customers’ trust, attract good leads or drive sales. So setting soft goals becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, guaranteeing that your writing will fail to achieve much that matters.¹¹

How to Re-envision Writing and Unleash Its Powers

Bottom line: in marketing, writing is a neglected underachiever—but an underachiever with potential to accomplish critical business goals.

And there's good news. There *is* a clear path to unleashing writing's superpowers.

It starts with re-envisioning copy and content as more than “just writing.” They're *writing genres*. And that small word “genre” makes a big difference.

But just what is a genre, anyway?

And what makes genres valuable for professional writers?

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- **Envisioning copy and content as “genres” means defining them in terms of action.** A genre is a writing form that’s evolved to accomplish a common communication goal.¹²
- **Some call genres “writing that does the work of the world.”** Genres are communication “power tools” that exist throughout the professions, in business, in the arts, and in everyday life.
- For example: A legal-brief writer aims to convince a court why one party in a lawsuit should prevail....A horror-film scriptwriter aims to make you scream for 90 minutes, then sleep with the lights on....A recipe writer aims to help you shop for and prepare a dish without scraping the first two batches into the garbage can.
- **Over time, writers note which language strategies best connect with readers to achieve specific goals.** And a store of principles for successfully writing in the genre is created.

Most professional writers work in specific genres and train in them, too, as students and in professional-development courses. Other professionals whose jobs require high-stakes writing, like lawyers, also get genre training.

MFA programs, journalism institutes, law schools, screenwriting seminars, science-writing internships and more train writers to create specific genres. As a result, poets, reporters and many others get multiple opportunities to study their genres’ inner workings and increase their own power to accomplish goals with words.

“If you learn why the best...write the way they do, you can import those same techniques into your own work,” one legal-writing expert explains.¹³

Copy and Content Genre

Knowledge Is Highly Useful...but Little Used

A look around a marketing department will likely turn up few if any in-house writers who've closely studied copy and content as genres.

Marketing departments do hire many writers who *have* studied writing genres. But their degrees and professional-development credentials are mostly in fields like journalism, technical writing, or creative-writing genres such as fiction. Only a handful of colleges and universities include copy and content writing on their curricula.

So what's going on? Is a genre approach less relevant to marketing than to other fields?

In fact, the opposite is true. **Genres develop to achieve real-world communication goals. And no genres embody that definition more fully than copy and content.**

Marketing writing exists for the sole purpose of achieving specific business goals, says Philip Kotler, distinguished professor of international marketing at Northwestern University's Kellogg School.

When creating an ad, for example, always begin by specifying the goal you'll aim at, Kotler says. Will your copy inform customers about a product? Persuade them to sign up for a mailing list? Stimulate some desire? "The first step is mission."¹⁴

All right, then. So thinking in genre terms is appropriate for marketing....

Maybe there's just not enough material...not enough "genre principles" to make studying them worthwhile?

Not the case either, marketing researchers say.

"The development of principles is a long-held tradition in advertising," according to Wharton's Armstrong. The search for effective copy strategies began among some advertisers more than a century ago. And because their companies' survival depended on their copy's success, most tested their conclusions with great care.¹⁵

"My income—my standard of living—depends bluntly and directly upon my ability to sell....I sell, or do not sell, on the basis of one tool alone—my ad," said one such copywriter-researcher. "Therefore, I have done a great deal of thinking and experimenting with these ads...to put my ideas to a conclusive test and to see whether or not they really work."¹⁶

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More recently, scholars in fields including business, psychology, communications and even neuroscience have explored the principles of successful marketing communication.

And over the past few decades, digital marketers have also joined the hunt. **Tech advances make it ever easier to test varying versions of copy against one another to discover which language strategies win more click-throughs or sales.**

“Experimentation is the bedrock of knowledge about these principles,” Armstrong says.¹⁷

Given this history, it’s hard to say why copy and content genre knowledge hasn’t sparked more interest.

However, partial explanations likely include the following:

- sheer overwhelm as marketers’ duties broaden into areas like product development and data technology,
- doubts about whether copy’s effects are truly measurable,
- fear of stifling creativity if writers adopt strategies others have used.

Whatever the reason, though, the result is that few marketing writers possess the knowledge that can turn “just writing” into a powerful business tool.

That’s the view of one copywriter who wondered for years whether writing “fluffy words” would be her only career accomplishment. Learning evidence-based principles that helped her create copy that solves real sales problems was a revelation, she says.¹⁸

Just like everyone else, writers want to help their companies succeed. **“You want to know that you’re contributing something real, and not just putting icing on the cake.”**¹⁹

How Evidence-based Writing Principles Boost the Bottom Line

Copy and content based on tested principles succeed where success counts most—in measurable business results like increasing website visits or sales.

Details of your writing matter. A lot.

And as technology makes it easier to test copy's effectiveness, **more evidence about what works and what doesn't emerges daily.**

6X CUSTOMER TRUST

For financial businesses, earning trust is critical. Research published in the *Harvard Business Review* shows how the right content helps.

Customers who received personalized welcome notes and saw online financial-education videos said they felt more emotionally connected to their investment firm.

Those emotionally connected customers were **6 times more likely to consolidate their money with the firm** than equally satisfied customers who didn't get the content.²⁰

15% MORE

FREQUENT BUYERS

As a retailer, you don't need just customers. You need customers who come back.

Customer loyalty to a clothing chain soared when the store surveyed buyers about their interests, then based ads and content like emails on what they learned.

Customer **attrition rate dropped from 37% to 33%**. The percentage of buyers passing on **positive word-of-mouth rose from 24% to 30%**.

And the percentage of **“active customers”—who made one or more purchases within a calendar year—rose 15%**.²¹

4X CUSTOMER TRUST

“Clear communications can mean billions in revenue,” say analysts at the Forrester Research business consultancy. That’s because your communications are a vital part of customers’ experience of your business.

“Customers are 3 to 4 times more likely to say they trust brands that communicate clearly. And when customers trust a brand, they prefer it to other brands.

“In contrast, when companies do not communicate clearly, customers perceive the brand to be deceptive or unethical—as literally trying to cheat them.”²²

SEARCH TRAFFIC UP 360%

“Mediocre posts don’t really hurt your website, so let them be and focus on adding great new content. Right?”

Wrong, according to Syracuse-based enterprise SEO company Terakeet.

Terakeet had scores of blog posts that didn’t meet standards for effective content. Duplicate posts, hard-to-read posts, too-salesy posts, posts that gave no helpful information.

So from June 2018 to February 2019, staff dumped, updated and improved the readability and value of old posts...while adding only 5 new ones. The result: **in those 8 months, organic search traffic grew by 360%.**²³

2X AS MANY LEADS CAPTURED

Real-estate customers who visit lead-generation landing pages value a clear, easy reading experience.

Web visitors were more than 2 times as likely to leave their contact information on a page written at 6th-grade reading level as on one written at university level.²⁴

10X SALES INCREASE

Copy showing how you'll better customers' lives beats copy bragging about your business every time, says online cooking-school owner Nadia Eghbal.

A complete copy overhaul using that principle changed her life, she says. One example: her home-page tagline "A Better Way to Learn How to Cook" switched to "Become a Cook in 30 Days."

Eghbal credits the messaging shift for a 10-times boost in sales.²⁵

CLICK-THRU RATE UP 161.66%

Echoing customers' language on web pages boosts response.

When Switzerland-based software company Veeam surveyed site visitors about what they'd like to see on product pages, many said "pricing."

Veeam pages offered that info through a link labeled with the classic line "Request a quote."

Switching the label to "Request pricing" raised the click-through rate by 161.66%.²⁶

How Writers Can Master the Marketing Genres

It may be tempting to wonder if powerful writing is learnable at all.

Many believe great writing springs from some uncanny force “linked murkily to muse and mysticism.” After all, effective marketing writing is special. It touches and moves us.²⁷

But effective writing is a learnable skill.

And genre study is one of the best routes to writing mastery.

So much so, in fact, that it’s spread from professional training into schools at all levels.

Marketing writers benefit in several ways from studying copy and content genres:

- Genre study analyzes writing that’s accomplished a specific goal like attracting leads. This sharp focus makes it **easy to understand what strategies helped achieve the goal as well as how and why they worked.**
- Genre learning includes **tips on effective processes**, such as what information to gather and how to analyze it to create a writing plan that can accomplish specific marketing goals.
- A genre-specific writing project offers a finite number of tested strategies to experiment with. This **eliminates the overwhelm and paralysis that can plague writers when they face unlimited options.**²⁸

But wait.

This sounds like a cookie-cutter approach. Won’t it cripple writers’ creativity?

In fact, having a repertoire of proven strategies for guidance and inspiration doesn't stifle creativity. It frees it.

Marketing writers must solve unique sales problems every day.

So they can't follow "somebody else's formula—no matter how successful it was....They demand creativity," says copywriter and marketing theorist Eugene Schwartz, who spent decades unearthing principles that underlie successful copy.

That's why learning genre principles doesn't mean mimicking fill-in-the-blank formulas or templates. Genre principles are "measuring rods, checkpoints, signpost questions"—tools that empower marketing writers to "cut through the surface of a problem to see what makes it tick."

Then, based on this analysis, **a writer can sift through strategies known to succeed in similar situations and modify them to solve the current challenge.**

It's a practical method that sparks creativity, Schwartz says.²⁹

Genre principles aren't fill-in-the-blank formulas or templates.

They're tools that empower writers to "cut through the surface of a problem to see what makes it tick."

What to Look for in Genre Learning for Your Writers

Numerous books, and some live and online classes and coaches give instruction in the copy and content genres today.

But what sort of instruction works best?

Scholars generally agree on this list of best practices for learning a writing genre. To attain mastery, writers need the following:

- **instruction about the genre's goals, the techniques and strategies** typically used to accomplish those goals, and the **principles that lie behind their effectiveness**;
- **variety of samples** for reference;
- **practice analyzing samples** to understand how they achieve their goals;
- **writing practice, including on self-chosen projects**;
- **feedback** on assignments, **preferably from a professional writer in the genre**.³⁰

Here's a list of genre-learning resources for copy and content, with a short assessment of how each stacks up on use of best practices:

Books

Things to consider:

- Accessible any time
- Low cost

Best-practice hits:

- Usually go deep into topics
- Often include variety of samples
- Usually written by professional writer in genre

Best-practice misses:

- Leave it up to readers to practice on their own
- Provide no feedback

Marketing Conference Sessions

Things to consider:

- Sometimes inspirational and fun
- Limited topics available

Best-practice hits:

- Sometimes provide practice
- Usually taught by professional writers in genre

Best-practice misses:

- Seldom cover topics in depth
- Seldom provide feedback

Professional Training Companies' One- or Two-Day Seminars

Things to consider:

- Aimed specifically at working writers in marketing departments

Best-practice hits:

- Often can cover topics in some depth

Best-practice misses:

- Seldom include much practice
- Seldom provide much feedback
- Often led by professional trainers, not writers

University courses, on campus or online

Things to consider:

- Often aimed at students, not working writers
- Offered by few schools

Best-practice hits:

- Cover multiple topics in depth
- Provide practice
- Provide feedback

Best-practice misses:

- Usually taught by professors, not working writers

Online courses on websites like Udemy and LinkedIn Learning

Things to consider:

- Accessible any time
- Often low cost

Best-practice hits:

- Sometimes taught by professional writers in the genre
- Sometimes cover a topic in depth

Best-practice misses:

- Seldom provide practice
- Don't provide feedback

Online courses by companies that train marketing writers

Things to consider:

- Accessible any time
- Multiple learning modes available—video, audio, transcripts

Best-practice hits:

- Taught by professional writers in the genre
- Cover topics in depth
- Provide multiple genre samples
- Provide practice

Best-practice misses:

- Don't always provide feedback

Onsite courses/coaching by companies that train marketing writers

Things to consider:

- Customized for your business

Best-practice hits

- Taught by professional writers in the genre
- Cover topics in depth
- Provide multiple genre samples
- Provide practice
- Provide feedback from working writers in the genre

Your next steps...

How about it? Do your copy and content deliver the business results your company needs?

Or is it time to equip your staff with a powerful new set of evidence-based writing tools?

Visit us at [url XXX.XXX.XXX](http://url.XXX.XXX.XXX) to download our free 10-point writer-evaluation survey. It's an easy-to-use diagnostic that provides an objective assessment of your department's writing needs and strengths to help you plan your next steps to copy and content greatness.

About AWAI

American Writers & Artists Institute (AWAI) is the world's leading provider of training programs for marketing writers. Founded in 1997 by several world-renowned copywriters, AWAI now offers a complete range of programs on everything from writing B2B lead-generation campaigns to writing B2C sales campaigns.

Whether your firm employs copywriters who need to get results, or content writers who need to build audiences, AWAI can help. E-mail, sales letters or web pages; case studies, video scripts, or white papers — AWAI offers “proven best practice” training programs taught by world experts in each domain.

AWAI's programs engage all types of learners with multimedia content: online “books,” video, audio, transcripts, exercises, personal feedback, quizzes/tests, and online groups. Students benefit from a multi-modal approach with live lectures, Q&A, project work, self-paced learning, and spec challenges. While AWAI has sold its programs mainly to individuals in the past, the growing need to train in-house writers led us to create a division for corporate and ad agency staff training.

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