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Copywriting Checklist – for reference after writing a draft

1. General

- Have you **read aloud**? It's the single best way to check for grammatical errors and syntactical clumsiness. It's also great for getting tone of voice right. If sales copy seems like a 'mouthful', you probably need to rework it. Remember: good copy is conversational.

2. Headlines and subheads

- Headlines should do one or more of the following:
 - **Identify the audience.**
 - **Identify a problem.**
 - **Express the major product benefit.**
 - **Plant a question in the reader's mind.**
- Watch **headline length**. Anything more than 8-12 words is edging on the long side, especially for print. Try using a headline combined with a standfirst, especially with longer copy or advertorial. Look at the way magazine designers handle this.
- Writing for the web? Headlines are important for **Search Engine Optimisation**, especially if they are going inside <h1> tags (as main headlines ideally should.) Get the keywords in there, but remember not to sound spammy. If in doubt, [talk to an SEO consultant](#).

- If you have included critical information in the headline, make sure it is **repeated in the bodycopy**, in case readers skip and start reading a few lines in. The first sentence isn't always the best place for this, especially online, as the inevitable repetition can sound spammy.
- **Are your subheads helpful?** Their main job is to aid readability, breaking up text and giving the reader 'signposts' in longer copy. They are also great for encapsulating sub-benefits.

3. Bodycopy

- Does your copy clearly express the **benefits** of the product or service on offer? This is probably the single most important quality of good copy. Don't focus on features (*the Whizzo 8000 Vacuum Cleaner's motor spins at 8000rpm*) but on the benefits those features offer prospective buyers (*the Whizzo's 8000rpm motor cleans your carpets twice as fast as our nearest competitor!*)
- Are you **getting those benefits in early?** The core benefit should be stated in the first or second paragraphs of your main pitch.
- While we're on the subject of **paragraphs**, make sure they aren't too long. For most copy, anything more than four or five lines is too much. The first paragraph is especially important as a readability hook. Try to keep it down to two or three lines.
- Watch out for **tics**, those little habits that creep into your copy. The *Copywriter's And* is a favourite – you're trying so hard to be conversational that every other sentence starts with a conjunction.

- Remember the importance of **'you' orientation**. Your copy is focussed on the benefits that the product offers to the reader. The reader will be asking 'what's in it for me?' Make sure you tell him directly. That means lots of *yous* and *yours*.
- Do you use the words **'free', 'new', 'save', 'no-risk', 'guaranteed', 'easy', 'simple', 'fast'** (and variants) whenever you can, all the while bearing in mind the brand values of the product?
- Does your copy **draw attention to itself**? It shouldn't. Good copy is transparent. The pitch should enter the reader's head without him being aware of the act of reading. So avoid strange constructions, puns, uncommon punctuation (i.e., semicolons), clumsy repetition and anything else that distracts from the central benefit(s).
- Does the copy include material that **builds trust**? Human angles, references to real people/customers, testimonials, direct quotes, pricing examples and so on work well here. If you include testimonials, include the full name of the person quoted. If you ascribe them to **'David S.'** or **'Diane, Stockport'** plenty of people will think you're making them up.
- Avoid **the sting in the tail**. If you're promising something for FREE, make sure the readers can genuinely get something free of charge. If you lure them in with promises you can't keep you'll destroy trust.
- Remember that **openness and honesty** are vital to good copy. You can't write well about a product you don't believe in. If a client asks me to mislead readers or misrepresent a product, I ditch that client.

- On the subject of honesty, if you're promoting some sort of special offer, don't forget to include the **reason why**. *50% off all widgets!* should sell some extra widgets. But *we need to clear warehouse space fast – 50% off all widgets until Friday!* will sell even more.
- You might need to **top and tail** bodycopy, especially in the first draft. Excess words tend to accumulate at the beginning and the end.

4. Tone of Voice

- As I've already said, good copy is **conversational**. Go through and make sure you haven't used any words that you wouldn't use in everyday conversation. You can make an exception for essential terms related to the product. But even those need to be explained clearly, unless you're talking exclusively to a specialist audience.
- Bearing that in mind, make sure you've achieved the right level of **formality**. You can be conversational and formal at the same time: ads for pension companies and law firms are typical of this style.
- Ideally, the tone of voice should **reflect your client's brand values**.
- **First person or third person?** This will depend on the business you're writing about. Whichever you've chosen, make sure you're consistent!

5. Calls to action

- Does each call to action contain **clear instructions**? All copy, from webpages to flyers to direct mail, should be written with a precise goal

in mind (call us now, buy this product, visit this store.) Each call should tell the reader exactly how to carry out the desired action: *Call us on 0845 1234 5678!*

- Does each call to action convey **a sense of urgency?** *Call us NOW on 0845 1234 5678!* You may want to vary this depending on the tone of voice the client requires, but in general urgent = good. You can increase urgency by adding a time limit: *Hurry – offer ends Friday!*
- Writing online copy? Give the reader **something to do at the bottom of every page** – even if it's just a [click here to return to the top](#). Leave them stranded at the bottom of a long column of copy and they will wander off to someone else's site.

6. Layout, typography and design

- Have you included **notes for the designer** where appropriate? Don't boss him about, but make sure it's clear where you want callouts, pull quotes and so on.
- If the copy depends on particular use of **layout and typography**, say so. Designers tend to focus on images rather than words, and sometimes make a poor job of copy layout. Make sure your designer isn't setting too wide/ using undersized fonts/ unreadable colours/ full, 'rivery' justification on wide columns.

7. Punctuation and grammar

- Businesses are legal 'persons' and, therefore, singular entities. So use singular verbs: *Boots is stocking our new range of deodorants* rather

than *Boots are...* When using pronouns, a company should be 'it' rather than 'they' UNLESS the copy focuses on the business as a group of people, in which case 'they' can sound more natural.

- Remember that -ly adverbs, excessive adjectives and -ing participles **gum up copy and affect readability**. Simplify and strengthen with descriptive verbs and strong, concrete nouns.
- The only thing the MS Word grammar checker is good for is spotting unnecessary **passives**. Be active and direct, just like you're talking to someone over a beer.
- All **apostrophes** in the right place? Watch out for its/it's your/you're – easy to mistype in a hurry.

8. Editing and proofing

- You're **wasting your time** proofing before the final draft. On preliminary and intermediate drafts, do a quick check but don't obsess.
- When you've done the final draft, it helps to **leave time** before proofing. The longer the better. You'll pick up far more small errors in your copy if you look at it with fresh eyes.
- Do remember **this obvious fact**: fixing typos you've missed in web copy is easy. Fixing them in print collateral is a lot less easy, especially after 100,000 copies have been run off.

- As far as possible, do the proofing **after the copy has been dropped into the design**. It's much easier than trying to find mistakes in a Word doc, spellcheckers notwithstanding. You can also spot things like widows, orphans and rivers. Don't expect the designer to do this for you: many don't have a clue about bodycopy typography.
- When it comes to proofing, **more eyes = better**.
- **Spellcheckers:** don't rely on them!