

 FabJob® **GUIDE TO**

BECOME AN ADVERTISING COPYWRITER



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1. Introduction

“Whatever you can do, or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it.”

—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

So you want to be a copywriter?

Congratulations on choosing a career in copywriting! Working in advertising as a copywriter is truly one of the best jobs on the planet. Just ask anyone who does it for a living.

Copywriters are the people who **read, write** and **create** the advertisements we read, watch or listen to every day. Their words move, persuade, and ultimately sell billions of products and services every year. You can see the power of their success in companies like **Nike, Coca-Cola** and **McDonald's**.



Not only is this career **creative, stimulating, entertaining, challenging** and often **glamorous**, but it's basically just a lot of fun every day of the week. One day you could be flying across the country to film a national TV spot. A week later you could be conjuring up the name of a new breakfast cereal. This means as a copywriter, chances are very good you won't get bored doing the same old thing over and over again.

1.1 What the Job Involves

Copywriters work mainly in advertising agencies, or in-house for large companies that have their own agencies. The **responsibilities** and **duties** of a copywriter vary from company to company and from job to job. But generally, the tasks and duties of a copywriter can be summed up as follows:

In addition to actually **writing the ads**, the copywriter:

- **Develops** ideas and concepts with the art director

- **Researches** the competition and the competitor's product with material provided by the agency research department, the client, or by looking it up on the Internet or elsewhere
- May **name** the product, **suggest** new ideas to the client, such as new ways to use the product, or new products themselves
- **Presents** ideas to the client
- **Discusses** changes with the client and implements any changes
- Or, **discusses changes** with the account executive and implements changes
- May be responsible for some or all **proofreading**, depending on the size and the resources of the agency
- **Supervises** the production of the **creative** along with the art director, the creative director, and the production department
- Copywriters are members of the agency **creative team**, which usually also includes **art directors**, the **creative director** (who's usually your boss), the **production team**, the **traffic** or **workflow team**, and often other team members depending on the agency structure.

For a typical assignment, copywriters get “**briefed**” by the account team. Getting a brief is just another name for a meeting where everyone sits down and discusses the job expectations, specifications, timelines and any other important details. The account team and sometimes the research department or planning teams are responsible for coming up with the “**strategic direction**” for a product or service (the agency's clients). The strategic direction is the basic premise, thought, belief or communication that the ad will need to convey. Don't worry, there'll be more on this later on.

Once the **account team** has decided on the proper direction or strategy for the product or service, they then brief the creative team with the **strategy** or **brief**. Some agencies have different names for the brief or statement, but generally most agency briefs contain similar elements. Basically, it is a compilation of all the information that the creative team needs to move forward.

A strategy brief or statement will usually contain information such as:

- Current consumer **beliefs** about the product

- **Competitor** information
- What **action** the ads should encourage people to take, often described as the “Call to Action.” This means that after reading or hearing the ad, should the consumer call an 1-800 number? Run as fast as they can to their local store to buy the product? Visit the advertiser’s website? Often there is more than one “call to action” to make it easy for consumers to respond.
- What **format** is required (TV spot, print ad, radio spot, etc).

Then What Happens?

The copywriter and the **art director** then work together to come up with **solutions**, whether those solutions are print ads, TV spots, interactive CDs, email campaigns, direct mail packages, outdoor posters, or whatever is deemed right for the product. Sometimes they, as a team, have days or weeks to create a winning campaign. Sometimes they have only a couple of hours.



As a working copywriter, you might have only one assignment to tackle at a time. This is usually a real luxury. More than likely though, you will have **several assignments** or even a dozen assignments at once. So you have to plan your time carefully.

At a larger agency, you might work on only one **client** or one **brand** (product or service) specifically, and that client will be your number one responsibility. This can be either an advantage or a disadvantage, depending on how you choose to look at it. You can be an expert for one client, or you may decide you don’t want to work on only one product.

However, just because you’re only working on one client doesn’t mean you won’t find variety and multiple **challenges**. For instance, that one client, such as Kraft Foods or Intel, may have dozens of different products, communicating to many different target audiences. So working on only one client may be a fantastic opportunity.

Either way, it's almost always a **roller coaster**, so if you have a day when you aren't especially busy, enjoy it, savor it, and relax a little. Because you never know what tomorrow will bring, and you'll probably be busy again before you know it.

“Life is either a daring adventure or nothing.”

—Helen Keller

1.1.1 Typical Week in the Life of a Copywriter

Monday Today you could be producing a series of radio spots with your in-house agency producer. This would entail choosing voice-over talent, directing your chosen talent to perform the way you envision, choosing the right music for the spot, possibly from a stock audio library, or having an original piece of music created. You will work closely with an agency producer, and the audio engineer, crafting your radio spot to turn out just the way you have envisioned or imagined it to sound. (**NOTE:** Radio is an arena in which copywriters can really shine, as the words, and the words alone, are the main stars.)

Tuesday Today you could start work on a customer brochure for an on-line stock trading company. This job would involve getting “briefed” by the account team, (details and expectations of the job explained) which is the official assignment or the beginning of the job. Along with your art director partner, you will agree on a timeline for the project and then begin to brainstorm ideas.

Wednesday Today you could be on a plane along with your art director partner to present a new print campaign to a client. Or you could simply attend a weekly status meeting to gauge where you are on all of your projects. You might also attend an off-site (out of the office) seminar to develop your skills.

Thursday You could start work on a website for a B2B client (that's business-to-business). Maybe your challenge is something like this: your client is trying to get small to medium-sized businesses to use their shipping services, and you and your art director have come up with the perfect solution.

Friday Let's say you happen to sell a TV spot. You could spend a week on location, maybe two or three weeks, depending on the complexity of the shoot. During the production of a TV spot, you will work with your art director, the creative director and an agency producer as you choose the actors for the spot, decide on the locations, the wardrobe, and all

the other details. You'll work closely with your agency producer and the commercial director to bring your vision to light.

Saturday

Just kidding, but maybe not. You might get a job where stopping in on the weekend from time to time will be required. That might mean just a couple of hours every now and then. Or you could work at an agency that's strictly 9 to 5. Every agency is different, and you should be able to figure that out pretty quickly once you've started your job. Every day is different and unique, and that's what makes this career very exciting and extremely rewarding.

“At one of the first agencies I worked for, they tried to scare me about the hours. They told me on average I would be working 50-60 hours a week. They asked me how I felt about that. As a young upstart I said, ‘No problem’ because I wanted to land the job. In reality, I was thinking, ‘Holy S*%\$! Are they crazy?’”

—Carrie, creative supervisor, Chicago

1.1.2 Who's Who at an Ad Agency

The Creative Department

Depending on the size of the agency, most creative departments have what is called an **ECD**, or **executive creative director**. He or she is usually the Grand Poo-Bah of the agency, setting the creative tone and direction for the agency, and making the final decisions on major campaigns. They usually also have the big, scary corner office with the great view.

Under the ECD, you might find group **creative directors**, followed by more **general creative directors**, **associate creative directors**, followed by **senior copywriters**, **copywriters**, and **junior copywriters**. **Art directors** are part of the same hierarchy, with **senior art directors** and **junior art directors** filling out the troupe. It all depends on the size of the agency. If your agency has 30 people, it might just be the creative director, you and the art director rounding out the creative department.

Generally, the **executive creative director** (who can also go by other names such as “communications director”) can come from either an art or copy background. From a writer's standpoint, it doesn't really matter. A good creative director should be able to provide direction and feedback on all aspects of a creative campaign.

As mentioned, at a small agency there may simply be one creative director and several art directors and copywriters working for that person. During an interview, it's always a

good idea to **ask** how the creative department is structured, and how many creatives are employed in the group. This will also give you a feel for how much interaction you will have with the creative director and who will be your (hopefully) eventual boss.

Other Departments

Each agency will have its own **hierarchy** and set-up. If you find work at a small agency, there is a good chance you'll end up wearing several hats and be responsible for several tasks simultaneously. That can be a great experience, as you'll learn more the more tasks you're exposed to. Generally, agencies are set up with these main departments:

Creative Department

Includes creative directors, art directors, writers, audio and video producers, and possibly a digital department.



Account Teams

Account people have the most and main client contact, and these include account directors, account supervisors, account executives, assistant account executives, and administrative assistants.

Research and Planning

This department works closely with the account team to plan the next moves for the client. This is where you will find focus groups and testing.

Media

Buys and places the media or “air time” (TV and radio) and space (print ads, billboards, etc.).

Production and Traffic

Those crucial to getting the ads physically produced and out the door on time. They are production artists, proofreaders and more.

Human Resources

Includes HR people, office managers, etc.

TIP: Be nice to Human Resources. They can make a huge difference in getting your foot in the door, and can make your entire interview process an easier course of action. Plus, this is not a difficult thing to do, as most human resources personnel are quite nice people. Another thing to keep in mind is that human resource employees move around just as much as the rest of the agency business. This means you could easily run into them at the local deli after you've left your job and you're looking for another one. Even if you're nervous, act delighted. Don't think about yourself; think about the person who is interviewing you. Ask them questions, and really listen to their answers. Most people are way too busy trying to impress others to actually listen to what others have to say. Act as if you haven't seen that person in quite some time, but don't go overboard. Be genuine and be yourself. When you're positive and upbeat, and fun to be around, then they will want to have you around.

“Don't wait for people to be friendly, show them how.”
—Unknown

1.2 Traits of a Good Copywriter

Successful copywriters possess many skills and qualities. **Writing** and **problem-solving** are absolutely at the top of the lists.

Wordsmith

Copywriters **sell**. That's their number one job. They also **entertain**, **educate** and **inform**. They do all of this through the words they write.

Chances are, if you're thinking about becoming a copywriter, you already have a passion for words and the English language. Maybe you're an avid **reader**; you love **movies** and **commercials**, and like to **entertain** people. Maybe you're fascinated by

psychology and why people do things or think a certain way. You don't have to be the king or queen of grammar, have a screenplay or two under your belt, or even the desire to write the great American novel. None of that is necessary to becoming a great copywriter. It's about ideas, communications, enthusiasm and passion.

Therefore, you should have a strong desire to write words that will move people to action. Be honest with yourself about this, because if you are not a **"wordsmith"** – if you don't enjoy writing, reading or being creative – then you won't have fun at this job. (And isn't that what it's all about?)

TIP: If you love and adore language, and as an aspiring copywriter the answer should be "yes," then you'll love a website called Word Spy at www.wordspy.com. It's devoted entirely to recently coined words and phrases that have just entered the cultural lexicon. Sometimes it reinvents old words that are now being used in new ways, and there are hundreds of fascinating entries to discover. The best part about the listings are they aren't "fake" words for your entertainment, but words that have already appeared several times in the media. Recent entries include: "metrosexual," "bridezilla," "drink the Kool-Aid," and "librarian chic." It's a terrific site to check out, and will definitely help add more color to your writing.

Problem-Solving

Copywriters mainly work in advertising agencies, and there are lots of different types of agencies to choose from. After you land your first job and your career begins to progress, it's a good idea to check out the many different types. The reason why is simple. Certain types of agencies might not pique your **interest** today, but things could change over time, and down the road one of them might be the perfect **niche** for you.

For instance, you might not think direct mail holds any interest for you, or that promotions are too limiting, or healthcare advertising is boring. But maybe you get a job in a **general agency**, and by chance you get put on a few of those types of assignments. You might discover that those specialties are right up your alley. You could have a special flair for *technical writing* and not even know it. Try to stay open-minded to all the possibilities, and you will go a long way.

Terry, a Chicago creative director says,

"Don't take anything personally. It is about business... always. If your work is criticized, it is because they want to challenge you and make you better. Learn to always be better. And always believe in your talent."

Other Traits

In addition to writing and problem-solving skills, many copywriters have a number of **other traits** in common. See how many of the following are true for you:

- _____ You are a keen **observer** and an excellent **listener**.
- _____ You love all kinds of **media** – books, movies, music, TV, the web, etc.
- _____ You have a great **sense of humor**.
- _____ You have a unique ability to **understand human nature** and what makes people tick.
- _____ You're **open-minded** and incredibly **flexible**.
- _____ You're able to get your work done **on time**. Of course you're not perfect (maybe you're a procrastinator or a perfectionist), but you meet deadlines.
- _____ You can **work well** either with a partner or team, or **solo** when necessary.
- _____ You can tackle a number of assignments with a **positive, upbeat attitude** and outlook.
- _____ You know how to **make your boss look good**.
- _____ You **get along** with the rest of the people on the team. Maybe you can't pitch a softball or spike a volleyball for the company team, but you show up at other company functions and know how to **play** the game.

TIP: **Meeting Deadlines. Let's draw some extra attention to this very crucial point here. Because if you work in an agency that has a retail account, you'll learn the importance of deadlines very quickly. Retail print ads sometimes go out the door the same day, so you'll have to learn how to manage your time and refine your skills without procrastinating. There is no "I'll get to it tomorrow" when the ad goes in the paper tomorrow.**

"Imagination is more important than knowledge, for knowledge is limited while imagination embraces the entire world."

—Albert Einstein

What else does it take to be a great copywriter? Take it straight from the mouths of copywriters themselves...

Catherine: **Talent**, an eye for detail, ability to do cartwheels at a moment's notice.

Greg: **Patience**, persistence and petulance.

Jennie: **Ingenuity**, innovative thinking, and **tenacity**.

Cliff: **Curiosity, courage**, no fear of embarrassment, and integrity.

Carrie: An ad person must be **resilient**, patient, detail oriented, **fun**, charismatic, **positive**, calm under deadlines, able to be creative on a variety of topics, accounts, and of course, have the strength to withstand extreme criticism. This field is not for the weak or sensitive.

Tim: **Dedication**, a thick skin, and a **great sense of humor**. You will need it.

Andrew: Being **open-minded**. Being able to change direction.

Dave: Deep breathing techniques. **Immense amounts of caffeine**. 3-D glasses.

Terry: I have seen the **gamut** of traits. They all work. **Talent** is crucial to being a copywriter.

Mindy, a talented copywriter who has worked for some of the biggest agencies in Atlanta, Chicago and San Francisco offers the following advice to anyone going into the business today:

“First, you’ve got to have a thick skin. Second, it’s always about the work. If someone dislikes what you’re presenting, it’s never really personal. That can be a hard lesson to learn, but it will get you through the day. And third, always have a backup plan. That, or rich parents.”

Here’s more sound advice from Carrie, a former creative supervisor at one of the largest direct marketing agencies in the world.

“Just don’t decide you’re going to be a writer or an artist because it sounds interesting. There must be some base creativity there from the beginning. Did you write poems as a child? Did you draw a lot or play around with computer art programs? It seems like young kids just say, ‘Advertising seems cool. I want to do that.’ I’ve seen a lot of junior people

falter because the field simply didn't come natural to them. You simply can't learn to be creative from books. I think the field must suit your personality. For example, can you freeform think of ideas on the fly? Can you pop a headline out as soon as you see a strategy deck? Do you look at something and get new ideas from it? These things are important. And remember... advertising isn't what it's portrayed to be in movies. It can be ugly, too. But hey, I wouldn't be here if I didn't love it."

Above all, it will be your **drive**, your **ingenuity** and your **desire** that will give you what it takes to become a great copywriter. Once you become a copywriter, you will be able to enjoy the many perks of the job.

1.3 Benefits & Perks

Copywriting can be an incredibly glamorous, gratifying and fabulous job. If you like **diversity** and **excitement**, this career is definitely for you. The benefits and perks of the job include:

Workplace Amenities

Premium coffee bars, loft offices, agency gymnasiums, pinball machines, pool tables, first-class flight upgrades, free movie tickets, in-house bars with complimentary alcohol (the client's of course), even working with celebrities. Yes, there's all this and **more** behind the doors of an ad agency. But that's not why you want the job is it?

Variety

As you saw earlier in this chapter, one great thing about the ad business is that practically every day of the week is **unique**, so you'll never get bored doing the same old thing over and over again. One week you could be writing copy for a winery, the next week for golf clubs, and the week after that, for the state lottery. The **possibilities are endless**.

Free Products

Did someone say the word Free? When you work in advertising, you will often get **free products** and **sample the products** you're selling over and over again. For example, if you're working on a food product, you get to attend recipe tastings and try new products before they hit the market. You will also likely get **free tickets** to movies and sporting events, depending on the agency and market that you work in. Many agencies also have bowls of the client's products (food-related) in the agency lobby. So you might end up eating handfuls of Hershey's kisses all day long, or chewing on Wrigley's Spearmint gum. Hey, it's a perk. And one that should probably make your dentist very happy.

Travel

Advertising often conjures up images of **travel** to glamorous places, and that is very often true. At times you could travel first-class to exotic and beautiful places in order to shoot a TV commercial. You might work with celebrity talent.



How much you travel depends on the agency and what types of clients they have on their roster. For instance, if you land a job in St. Louis and the agency has clients in Los Angeles, you may be expected to travel to present your work to the client from time to time.

As a beginning writer, you may not travel much. More than likely, a more senior person will be sent to present creative work to the client. That will give you time to learn the ropes and “**standard agency protocol**” (a fancy term for “how that agency likes to operate”). However, as confidence in you and your work grows – and it will – the agency will likely send you to present your work to the client.

If you want to work abroad, you may have that opportunity if you get a job with a **national agency** with overseas offices.

Fame and Recognition

But probably the most rewarding part of all is the first time you turn on the radio or TV and see or hear **your radio or TV spot**. Now that’s a moment that compares to nothing else. Or imagine the day you first open up a newspaper or magazine to see **your ad** in living color. Or the day you’re driving down the highway and look up to see your billboard ad, singing from the rooftops. It’s almost as good as the time your Mom put your watercolor picture on the refrigerator. Sure, there’s lots of ego involved in the ad world, but more than anything, there’s plenty of personal pride and ownership in the work that you do. It’s your creative baby, after all. Your words, and your ideas, put out there for the whole world to see.

This perk can best be described in experiences like this one from Greg:

“One of my fondest experiences happened when I was writing radio spots for Allstate Insurance at Leo Burnett. All the scripts were to be read live by Paul Harvey on his nationally syndicated news program, *The Rest of the Story*. I must have written a hundred scripts and presented them both internally and to the client in my own best Paul Harvey impersonation. One day the phone rang and there he was. That voice. Paul Harvey calling to give me the thumbs up on the day’s script. I knew I had arrived.”

Jenny adds:

“I created a spot once for breakfast cereal that ran nationally during the Academy Awards, so I know that pretty much everyone in America saw that spot air. It was pretty exciting to know I was reaching so many people, even though all I was saying was something like ‘Yum. Yum. Nutty, chewy clusters you’re gonna love!’ Yes, my Mom was very proud.”

You will work hard at this job, but when you finally complete your projects, and your creativity is out there communicating, telling a story, making people laugh, and selling a product, it’s an incredibly gratifying feeling.

Okay, maybe it’s not exactly **Melrose Place**, where everyone is a size 4, (including the guys), with perfect hair, capped teeth, and corner offices. But that was television, and this is the real world. Maybe you remember the TV drama series from the 80s called **Thirtysomething**. That show probably had the ad industry pegged more truthfully than any other, and it still appears on cable in reruns, should you get the chance to see it.

And here are some cool ad movies to inspire you:

[Crazy People](#) with **Dudley Moore** and **Daryl Hannah**

[How to Get Ahead in Advertising](#) with **Richard E. Grant**

[Nothing in Common](#) with **Tom Hanks**

[Picture Perfect](#) with **Jennifer Aniston**

[Putney Swope](#) an oldie directed by **Robert Downey Sr.**

[What Women Want](#) with **Mel Gibson** and **Helen Hunt**

1.4 Inside This Guide

This guide will show you, step-by-step, what you need to do to become an advertising copywriter.

Chapter 2, **Getting Ready**, offers a variety of ways to learn copywriting, including educational programs, online courses and links to the best resources for teaching yourself copywriting. This chapter also explains, in detail, how to prepare a portfolio and how to quickly get practical copywriting experience.

Chapter 3, **Getting Hired**, covers everything you need to know to land a copywriting job. We tell you about the different types of agencies and which is easiest for a beginning copywriter to break into. You'll discover how to find job openings, how to contact the right people in an agency, and how to ace an interview. This chapter also has information about dozens of top well-respected advertising agencies and offers tips on breaking into copywriting through other ad agency jobs and freelancing.

Chapter 4, **Being Successful on the Job**, offers practical tips to help you work your way up the ladder once you've landed your first ad agency job. It explains how to learn the ropes, how to avoid common mistakes, and how to make a great impression. Also, how not to take things too seriously.

The guide concludes with a helpful **Glossary** of advertising industry terms so you can sound like a pro when you speak with prospective employers.