

Whaaat?!? You copied my copy?

 By [Tiffany Markman](#)

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In 10 years of full-time copywriting, I've had copy stolen three times. To clarify, I'm not talking about a short paragraph here and a sentence there. I'm talking about dense, concrete chunks. Blocks of (unattributed, un-linked, un-referenced) writing in a style so distinctively mine I'd know it anywhere. So communicators and creatives, take note: I have some advice for you.

My copy was stolen...

1. Twice by 'friends' and once by a stranger
2. Twice by 'writers' and once by a wannabe
3. Twice for profit and once for 'marketing'

What do all three instances of plagiarism have in common? All three of the copy thieves presented themselves as communicators. As people who should, on their own and without 'borrowing', be able to generate original content.

The first time I wuz robbed I wrote it off. Decided not to make a thing of it and stopped investing in the friend. The second time I stewed for ages, effected an unsatisfying confrontation and stopped investing in the friend. And the third time I got pi\$\$ed off and invested in a lawyer's letter. *That* was satisfying.

Communicators, take note:

1. Wholesale reproduction

If you reproduce someone's copy, change a few words here and there and present it as yours, that's stealing. I don't care what the copyright laws stipulate. You're a writer: you're obliged to come up with your own stuff.

If you're incapable of drumming up an original phrase, thought or idea, here's a gentle suggestion: how about some lovely call centre work instead?

As an aside: The first of my textual pickpockets took my bio, changed my name to his and used it on his blog. Even going so far as to inadvertently include memberships he didn't have, because my bio had them. Lame.

2. Friendly borrowing

If you 'borrow' copy from more experienced friends, without asking them, it will make them cross. Especially if they've been generous with you in the past.

Reach out. Ask for the help. Bribe them with paleo-friendly biscuits (red velvet is so last season.) Worst case, they say No. Best case, they help you to come up with your own, so you know how to do it next time. Granted, they may think you're a tad slow, but that's what friends are for. Supposedly.

As an aside: The second of my textual pickpockets accepted a stack of carefully created business documents and templates from me, based on my own trial, error and hard work, and - mere weeks later - pasted meta-data from my website into the back-end of hers. Verbatim. *How stupid was I?*

3. Idea misappropriation

If you read something and think 'Hey, that's a clever gimmick,' don't immediately use the same gimmick. It's theft. Maybe not in the legal sense, but Karma is a bitch and she will bite you. Hard. In a soft spot.

They say there's nothing new under the sun. Maybe that's true. But there's a lovely resource out there - Google - and if it's not too daunting, perhaps you could try to do a bit of research to come up with a gimmick of your own? Or, at least, one that isn't immediately identifiable as someone else's.

As an aside: The third, and worst, of my textual pickpockets must have really liked the (un-wonderful, but this was 2005) 'Kings & Queens' analogy I used to theme a grammar training course. Because she and her popular Joburg-based writing company stole it - giving their programme an identical name.

Luckily they proved to be crappy presenters, especially of unfamiliar content.

If you're gonna do this, make sure you're at least as good as - if not better than - the person you're 'flattering' with your copy-paste. (But if you were, you'd probably come up with your own stuff to start with. So much for that.)

What about being inspired by others?

This happens. You read something or see something and you like the style, tone, idea - whatever. It inspires you to do something along similar lines. Fine. Inspiration is all very well and good. But be honest with yourself. You're not a moron, hopefully. You know when you've been scaly and when you haven't.

What about just absorbing stuff?

There's a lot of stuff out there and we all read, share and comment prolifically. It's possible that, amidst all that rabid consumption, some of it sticks and you, mistakenly, parrot someone else's originality. But - let's be frank - you're not eidetic. You don't enjoy total recall. So if it's more than a sentence or a vague idea that you're repeating and claiming ownership of, think again.

And before I sign off, remember:

No-one likes a cheat. Meditate. Do some deep breathing. Doodle. Draw a pretty mind map. Try to dredge a unique notion up from the depths. If nothing emerges - well, that's life, bucko. But watch your back for Karma.

ABOUT TIFFANY MARKMAN

I spend 10 hours a day writing - and teaching others to write. I was South Africa's Freelance Copywriter of the Year in 2020 and one of the world's 'Top 50 Female Content Marketers' in 2021.

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