

Six things 2010 may have taught you about writing

I learned a couple of things this year that I didn't know that I knew. For starters, there were things I thought to be true about writing and my readers that aren't any more. Things that can be done better if they're done differently. New things that just make sense.

 By [Tiffany Markman](#) 29 Nov 2010

It's possible that the recession changed things - or that we're evolving as consumers of content, thanks to social media and other good stuff. So it's also possible that, as a marketer or communicator, you've picked up a couple of the same things in your business writing environment... Either way, here's my take.

1. The brief is ultimately the writer's responsibility

So, I'm a good writer. Not Hemingway, mind you, or Dahl, but reasonably good. As a result, I'm almost always able to give clients what they want - first time round. Very seldom do we get into second or third rounds of tweaks or, worse, requests for rewrites. Except in one particular situation: if I don't take a solid enough brief to begin with. And this happened to me once twice, painfully, during 2010. (I guess I've just been lucky for the last nine years or so...)

I realised this year that I can beg clients to give freelancers good briefs until I'm chartreuse in the face, but many clients either don't know exactly what they want, or do know and can't easily express it. It's not their job, actually. It's mine. So it's to *me* to get a good brief. To squeeze it from the stone, if necessary. I'm the one who's done this before, for others, and I know what's needed.

So, how to go about finding this holy grail? I have to demand the relevant time and client access, do the research beforehand, ask the right questions, fill the gaps, ensure that everyone's on the same page and only then - once client knows what he's getting and I know what I'm in for - start the writing process. Otherwise client doesn't enthuse, I get sad and things get messily drawn out.

2. If the copy doesn't explicitly ask, it doesn't get

I teach this in all of my writing workshops, so I've said it before, but this year I awoke fully to the fact that copy that isn't explicit - that doesn't make clear exactly what the reader should a) think and b) do next - is going to achieve *ghai-gedoches* (Yiddish, if you'll pardon the phonetic spelling, for 'jack****'). It needs to come out and say exactly what it means. Sometimes this is as obvious as:

"We care about your complaints. Most companies say they do, but they don't - so you whinge a bit and you never hear from them again. Not with us. Click here to share your horror story, and we'll do something about it. Within 48 hours. Or your next cup of coffee is free. Promise. Here's a coffee voucher, just in case."

3. If you can't summarise your issue in 140 characters...

My copywriting colleagues will agree that very often we have to become quick experts on an issue, area or niche we've never worked in before. And that doing so requires an unbelievably intricate understanding of the arena in question.

Clients have sometimes asked me, "How will you understand what I do clearly enough to write about it?"

And until now, I've never known what to say. *"Um, dunno... I just will. I'm smart, you see, and I have a good general knowledge..."?*

Nope. This year I realised that the best person to write about a specific topic for a general or mainstream audience is a member of that audience. Me. And that, with the right questions, I can get enough of a sense of things to write about

anything.

But, if I can't summarise the issue in 140 characters (okay, 156 including spaces), I'm never going to do it justice, no matter how much research or reading I do. So the seriously technical stuff should probably best be a) handed to a specifically technical/industry writer or b) thrown together by client and edited by me.

4/ 'My way' isn't always what the client actually wants.

For the first time this year I had clients who can't really spell tell me that they weren't wild about my copy "because it didn't make sense". Despite my resulting rage - and my burning desire to point out my impressive education/skill set - I realised in 2010 that this means *my* perfect copy might not be *their* perfect copy.

(You can imagine, I hope, the massive blow to my not-particularly small ego.)

The copy might be a) too casual, b) too formal, c) too clever or d) none of these. It might be that their audience has certain expectations of the writing, and that these need to be met. It might be beautiful to my eye, but not to theirs. In short, it might be what *I* would want, but not what client really wants, deep down.

And so, a new question I plan to ask every client in 2011 is: "What kind of writing do you think your company/audience will feel comfortable with, and how does this fit into the outcome or objective you hope to achieve with this copy?"

5. Readers' 'bull** thresholds' are dropping like flies.**

I had a lot of brave and progressive clients this year. Clients who were happy to give me the go-ahead to tell it like it is. More than once, my brief was: "Let's just be honest with the audience; let's not feed our readers a whole lot of spin." And this extended from small one-man shows to mammoth global multinationals.

This sort of go-ahead is a fantastic gift for any writer, because writing honestly is a whole lot of fun. We get to speak directly to the reader. To engage and chatter. We also get to tell the whole truth, which is heavenly (and somewhat rare), and to be believed when we do so. There's a lot of credibility-building involved.

And, it works. This year, for example, readers didn't have the patience for waffle, gumph or extravagant promises. They wanted the honest truth - in short and simple sentences, sparse paragraphs and faint praise. And they got it. Yay.

6. Even the people who really can't spell notice the typos.

This one always amazes me, but in 2010 I realised the extent to which typos, hideous spelling and dodgy grammar grab readers by the throat. Even if the readers themselves couldn't find a dictionary with a large seeing-eye dog.

This realisation made me more convinced than ever that a pro once-over - even if that's all it is - should be sought for *any copy that's important*. "Ag, man, no-one notices..." won't cut it. Because everyone does. And it damages brands.

Obviously it's best (quickest and most reliable) to get an editor to do this for you. But if your budget is so meagre you couldn't locate it *with* the aforementioned seeing-eye dog, get someone in the office who has a dependable and super-control-freakish eye to double-check it for you. It's worth it. I promise.

As a follow-up to these six realisations, I'm contemplating a 2011 Biz Trends piece that predicts what we're in for next year in the business writing arena. See you then - or drop me a line with your own stunning epiphanies for 2010. Hoo-ha!

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