

BROADCAST/CABLE COPYWRITING

F I F T H • E D I T I O N

PETER B. ORLIK

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BROADCAST/ CABLE COPYWRITING

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PREFACE

Some writers are motivated by their profession's artistic challenges. Others are energized by its financial incentives. Broadcast/cable copywriting offers the stimulating opportunity to have it both ways: to experience constantly evolving tests of your verbal artistry while enjoying significant monetary rewards for successfully passing those tests. Whether you are an experienced media professional seeking to hone your writing ability further or a novice wordsmith striving to gain employment in radio and television, this book is designed for you.

Broadcast/Cable Copywriting, Fifth Edition, introduces you to the special requirements and pitfalls of creating the continuity, commercials, and off-air presentations that are the life's blood of electronic communication. Unlike the limited-access world of full-length entertainment and documentary script creation, broadcast/cable copywriting is a widespread enterprise that requires thousands of practitioners. It is a function that every local outlet must perform; an activity in which every advertising, public relations, and other corporate entity communicating via radio/television must engage. And despite their comparative brevity, commercial continuity pieces exemplify all the requisites of media form and content that electronic journalism and feature-length fiction demand. Thus, guided exposure to these short, standard elements of the copywriter's repertoire also will acquaint you with the stylistic techniques you'll need to master long-form projects.

On the other hand, like many wordsmiths before you, you may discover that the opportunity, the compensation, and the challenging diversity of *copywriting* are difficult to abandon in favor of the more sober environment of the newsroom or the much less stable world of program script creation. Do not be surprised if you decide to spend your *entire career* as a copywriter and/or continuity supervisor, marketing services manager, or agency creative director.

Over the years, electronic media copywriting has become much more than the audio/visual hawking of goods. Audiences now view the best commercials as entertainment in their own right, with entire television specials built to showcase the copywriter's art. And like any art, copywriting requires continuous training. "Writing," Professor Dennis Brown reminds us, "is not like riding a bicycle, a skill which if learned once is not forgotten. It is more like music—we must practice constantly not just to improve but to maintain our competence."¹ *Broadcast/Cable Copywriting*, Fifth Edition, strives to assist in such productive practice.

As in the previous edition, this volume is divided into four main parts. After an appraisal of the copywriting marketplace (Chapter 1) and how our jobs reflect communication process considerations (Chapter 2), Part One continues with an inventory of the tools (Chapter 3), human motivations (Chapter 4), and audience characteristics (Chapter 5) that the writer must learn to manage. Part One concludes by examining copy creativity, definition, and validation as well as prominent regulatory and stylistic constraints (Chapter 6). This first section thereby sets the stage for Part Two, which probes radio's key elements (Chapter 7), commercials (Chapter 8), and additional endeavors (Chapter 9). The parallel Part Three then uses a similar chapter trio (Chapters 10, 11, and 12) in the exploration of television. Finally, Part Four delves into the interlocking process of campaign construction: first, for the conventional radio/television campaign (Chapter 13); next, for the more specialized creation of public service appeals (Chapter 14); and last, for the hazardous practice of political, controversy, and crisis advertising (Chapter 15).

For teachers using *Broadcast/Cable Copywriting* as a class text, a separate Instructor's Manual provides a model syllabus, a selection of industry copy acceptance guidelines, and a series of Suggested Exercises to facilitate application of the techniques this Fifth Edition explores.

Throughout the book, a great many rules and precepts are advanced. Even though each has been tested time and time again in the intensely competitive electronic media, each (except for those ordained by government or industry regulations) can also be broken, given a specific and unique set of circumstances. Knowing the general rules, however, ensures that when you do decide to ignore one, your decision is not inadvertent but is based on a careful, conscious, and calculated appraisal of why this proven principle does not apply to the assignment at hand.

You are cautioned not to view the separate chapters of this book as independent and self-standing wholes. Do not, for example, think that you will acquire all of the information pertinent to writing *radio commercials* simply by reading the chapter bearing that title. Instead, the fifteen chapters in this Fifth Edition are mutually supportive. Each contributes additional perspectives to what is covered in others. Thus, guidelines introduced in conjunction with television *commercials* are at least partially applicable to *public service announcement* writing, and vice versa. In the constantly mutating world of electronic copy, nothing remains totally discrete for very long.

Like the four previous editions, this latest version of *Broadcast/Cable Copywriting* deepens your comprehension of the subject through numerous examples and illustrations. Many of these models are quite current. Others are more historic and are featured because they have made enduring contributions to the practice of effective radio/television communication. It is especially gratifying to be able to include samples contributed by many of my former students (in order of appearance): Andrew Schmittiel, Christopher Conn, Sheila O'Donnell, Paul Boscarino, Dan Nelson, Jerry Downey, Susan Montgomery, John Schroeder, and Stephen Serkaian. These people are true professionals who have established themselves in the communications business and who continue to excel there as they did in the classroom we once shared.

One final bit of housekeeping before we begin. In an effort to increase the number of examples while still keeping the length of the book manageable, we have condensed the format of the sample scripts. IN ACTUAL PRACTICE, ALL COPY SEGMENTS THAT ARE SINGLE-SPACED IN THIS BOOK NORMALLY WOULD BE DOUBLE-SPACED, AND ALL COPY HEREIN DOUBLE-SPACED WOULD BE TRIPLE-SPACED.

Now, let's proceed, in the words of creative director Curvin O'Reilly, to "*Have some fun*. Despite all signs to the contrary, advertising is still the toy department of the business world. Enjoy."²

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Appreciation is expressed to the many professionals in the electronic media and publishing industries who collectively provided the wealth of script and other illustrative material for this Fifth Edition. Many of their names appear in the text following the copy or other creative achievements

they made available. The multiple quotes from *ADWEEK* and *Winners* have been reprinted with the permission of *ADWEEK*.

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Finally, gratitude goes to our two children, Darcy and Blaine, who have grown up with this seventeen-year project and put up with all of its distractions.

Thank *you*, the reader, for your company as we now explore together the specific components and techniques of copywriting for the broadcast and cable media.

Endnotes

1. Dennis Brown, "Students Need More Writing Instruction, Not Less," *Chronicle of Higher Education* (October 19, 1988), B 3.
2. Curvin O'Reilly, "Why Some People Have More Ideas," *ADWEEK* (February 15, 1988), 57.

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■ Chapter 1

The Copywriting Marketplace

In order to understand the prerequisites and pressures of radio and television copywriting, we must, at the outset, find out something about the employment situations into which the copywriter is thrust. When we refer to copy jobs, we are not talking about the singular and largely inaccessible world of the entertainment scriptwriter, a world that regularly employs only a few hundred people. Nor are we referring to the discrete reportorial world of the media journalist. Instead, our focus encompasses that multitude of situations in which nonnews *copy*, the life's blood of all electronic media activities, is created.

Copy is the short piece of written craftsmanship that propels, promotes, defines, and ultimately helps to pay the bills for every carrier of radio and television programming. Unlike full-length (long-form) program scripts, which are the exclusive province of a handful of East or West Coast specialists, pieces of copy must be created by writers at virtually every station, cable system, and other local electronic medium. Copy must also be generated by the many agencies, corporations, and institutions that seek to make an impact on and through those telecommunications delivery vehicles.

The typical piece of copy is ten, fifteen, thirty, or sixty seconds long. Nevertheless, like the full-length script, it must tell a tale or reveal a truth within the time allotted. This is why some writers view copy creation experience as invaluable preparation for a career in news or long-form program writing. As Guy McCann points out, "A copywriter practices a disciplined form of creativity which requires study of a subject, identification of benefits and the generation of useful ideas that achieve precisely defined objectives. A copywriter, it might be said, must have a pragmatic inspiration when required and on schedule."¹

Some wordsmiths aspire to media management and realize that success both in media *and* in management depends on the deft supervision of written words. They quite rightly view copywriting experience as a valuable preparation for later administrative roles. Other writers, however, see copywriting as a complete career in itself. Along the way, these folks learn that, although job contexts differ, traditional writers and *copy* writers share several key traits. As author and ad agency owner Lois Wyse puts it, both novels and pieces of

copy “require the ability to express ideas in succinct, powerful and caring terms.”² But merely “having the urge to write doesn’t necessarily make you a writer,” adds Professor Howard Good. “Writing requires attention, discipline, and a strong backside.”³

Assuming *your* backside is hardy, study and practice in the contexts and techniques of copywriting can pay significant professional dividends whatever your own long-term expressive goals may be. Most of this book is about techniques. But for a few pages, let’s look first at the major employment contexts from which copy springs.

Freelance

This term has a decidedly mercenary origin. It was first applied to warriors too poor or unaccomplished to have their own land or liege lord. They hired themselves and their lances out to anyone who would employ them in order to establish a reputation and accumulate a little wealth. Set designer Dane Krogman recounts that the Duke of Argyll organized freelancers when he unified the Scots against the English. “But it didn’t do any good. They got beaten and went back to being lances for hire. It’s the same thing for anybody who’s a freelancer today—you’re true and loyal to whoever’s paying you the most money for that particular day.”⁴

Freelancing is one way for young copywriters to test, even on a part-time basis, their ability to create marketplace material that successfully serves a commissioned need. Initially, this might be constructing anything from public service spots for the local YMCA to commercials promoting a home-town merchant. Ultimately, if such small assignments are successfully dispatched, the freelancer may move beyond writing to become a one-person advertising agency: “pitching” area business folk on the need for radio and television exposure, creating the commercials, supervising their production, and even handling the actual time buys on stations and cable systems.

Part-time freelancing is a prudent way for the fledgling writer, like the obscure warrior, to fashion a reputation and make a little money before attempting to slay the fiercer dragons lurking in full-time employment and comprehensive media campaigns. For seasoned writers, too, freelancing on a full- or part-time basis can be professionally, psychologically, and economically satisfying. As veteran writer Susie Burtch testifies: “You don’t have to hold the client’s hand or be on the phone all day. I earn a full-time salary, there’s no overhead, I’m my own boss and set my own hours. And as far as I’m concerned, you just can’t get a better deal.”⁵ Tom Tawa, one of advertising’s most successful freelancers, adds, “You are totally in control of your own time. There’s none of that guilt if you want to go skiing or running. I have time for doing things I never had the time to do—like my taxes.”⁶