



The Writer's Compass

Turning the Next Page

Briefing 2: Text Sells! Writing for Business Jules Horne

This briefing sheet is based on a session delivered by Jules Horne at Turning the Next Page, an event for graduates of Scotland's Creative Writing Masters and PhD programmes and early career professional writers held at the CCA, Glasgow on Saturday 16 April 2011. Turning the Next Page is presented by The Writer's Compass (NAWE) in partnership with CCA, Glasgow Life, Gutter and Scottish Book Trust and funded by Creative Scotland.

About the author

Words have always been at the heart of what I do, and like most writers I've used them in a variety of different jobs. After a degree in German and French I did a PGCE, taught English in Germany, then worked as a German Foreign Office translator, a news sub for BBC Monitoring, and a radio journalist with Swiss Radio International. Never giving up the dream to write full-time, I returned to Scotland finally in 2000 and have been juggling ever since! Important milestones include an SAC New Writers' Bursary, a RLS Fellowship and the chance to be mentored on the Scottish Book Trust Scheme by Philip Howard, Artistic Director of the Traverse Theatre, on my first full-length stage play, *Gorgeous Avatar*. Since then, I've written several stage and radio plays – most recently *Macmillan's Marvellous Motion Machine* for Radio 4. I also teach creative writing for the Open University. I live in the rural Borders, and started my writing company, Texthouse, partly as a way of getting round the isolation of creative writing. I offer copywriting, marketing and PR services to business, and work with an inspiring array of graphic and web designers, branding specialists and companies. I'm a member of Borders Creative and 26, the UK writers' organisation which champions the creative use of language in business.

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Why write for business?

It's an opportunity to be your own boss, choose your work and get involved in a wide variety of projects. It can be better paid than freelance teaching, and gets you out of the house and meeting people in different lines of work, which I find creatively inspiring. It's ideal for the kind of writer who enjoys the flow, process and challenges of actual writing, rather than secondary activities such as teaching, talks and readings. And it satisfies your writer's curiosity about all sorts of different jobs! I don't have a problem 'switching' because I find the writing and creative skills exactly the same. If anything, I find the pace more energising, and it can make you less precious about early drafts.

What writing skills are called for?

First off, you need to be a demon editor and proofreader – your words may be expensively printed in four colours on leaflets that will stay around for years. Other indispensable skills include clarity and economy. Beyond that, you'll need to develop an understanding of storytelling, impact, tone of voice, metaphors, word pictures and audience engagement. These may sound pretty familiar to most writers, but it's worth diving deep into the ways these are used in copywriting – it will feed into your creative writing, too. Drama experience comes in handy, because it means you're used to considering audience impact, using the spoken language, and working collaboratively. Journalism experience gives you a robust attitude to deadlines, word counts, briefs, interviewing and rewrites.

The key difference between commercial and creative writing is that 'it's not about you!' (Andy Maslen*). It's all about getting an engaging message across to a specific group of people, whether it's restaurant customers, pharma shareholders, tweed trade buyers, waiting room patients or scuba divers. The more you can empathise with the target audience and get inside their heads, the more you'll connect – and that's a profoundly creative skill.

What other skills are needed?

A grounding in copywriting and basic marketing is very useful. Become familiar with common business and marketing terminology: USP, B2B, B2C, SME, features, benefits. Be aware that old-school marketing is shifting towards digital marketing, and that the two have different writing requirements. Web copywriters will need to learn about SEO (search engine optimisation) and master the tricky balance of writing engaging words that also attract search engines. Listening and interviewing skills are very helpful – you need to get your head round complex subjects, and often bring clarity and focus which your client may not have. People and communication skills go without saying. You also need to be willing to take (and tactfully offer) direction, and respond helpfully to feedback. Other requirements: the usual IT skills, and a professional attitude to deadlines, finances and record-keeping. To get started, I joined the Chartered Institute of Marketing and took a course in copywriting, as well as some free Business Gateway courses on SEO, bookkeeping and marketing. I've also exchanged skills for words, e.g. social media marketing training with a startup who needed copy. Stay curious and open to learning, because these areas are changing all the time.

Who might need your services...

Work can come direct from businesses themselves, or from businesses service providers such as printers, graphic and web designers, creative agencies. If you have a sector specialism thanks to previous jobs or leisure interests (medical, hospitality, non-profits, mountain biking...), consider trying there first. Even if it doesn't lead to paid work, it will help build your portfolio. Public sector is hard to get into now because everything is put out to tender. Very large companies will probably have their own marketing teams, or use agencies. Start close to home with what you know, and build from there. Business networking (e.g. Chamber of Commerce, Federation of Small Business) may be useful, but you need to be prepared to invest the time it takes to win people's trust and gain credibility.

...and why?

Business managers are often too close to their industry jargon, and may struggle to communicate with customers. They may also be used to writing in a formal register, rather than a more accessible spoken tone. They can tend to talk from their company's viewpoint, rather than the customer's. On a practical level, business people are often pushed for time and find writing onerous. Many marketers are generalists and have learned copywriting techniques that can make their writing lifeless and clichéd. As a creative writer, you can easily handle imaginative leaps and bring a fresh, lively perspective.

What kind of writing might businesses want?

Web and print marketing and sales copy, press releases, leaflets, brochures, newsletters, case studies, internal communications, annual reports... everything's written by someone. The tricky bit is to convince businesses that you can do better, and bring more value, than the (often in-house) person who usually does the job.

So how do I get started?

Start by building a portfolio of work samples. How do you get work without having work to show? Various options: Work up written pieces from previous job roles. If you've done journalism, include a couple of examples. Be prepared to do some free or low-cost samples if necessary. Approach a friendly business owner who could do with a site/leaflet makeover. Try the voluntary sector. Offer some writing in exchange for a testimonial. Find a student graphic designer and collaborate on a speculative portfolio piece – that way, you get great design to go with your great words. And as soon as you possibly can, replace these pieces with real paid examples for real commercial clients.

What else do I need?

Business cards and a simple website are helpful but not initially essential. Buy a smart folder to present your portfolio, or consider an online showcase.

What do I charge?

Hard to answer! This depends so much on the market where you live and your level of experience, and it's constantly changing. Rates that make a Borders company balk might be seen as quite low in Edinburgh. Also, some writers charge by the hour, some by the project, so it's hard to compare. As a rough guide, £25-£30 per hour seems reasonable for someone starting out, though this can rise as you gain experience. Businesses often prefer a project rate – but how do you gauge how many hours you'll need? The only way is to do a few jobs and get a feel for it. If it's a long piece, break it down into its component parts, cost one, and multiply. If it turns out you got it wrong, learn from it and move on. Avoid internet copywriting companies offering criminally low rates. You are offering high value services and that isn't your market. Which brings me to...

...a final note

One of the most important lessons I've learned in business is to take risks, dive right in and adjust as you go along. It's very unusual for things to be clear and ready when you meet a client or start on a job. You make progress through various iterations, by collaborating, shaking off setbacks, and learning from every job – which is great for creative writing, too!

Reading suggestions

Dark Angels: How Writing Releases Creativity at Work (Marshall Cavendish, 2005)

Brilliant Copywriting, Roger Horberry (Pearson, 2009)

*Write to Sell, Andy Maslen (Marshall Cavendish, 2009)

Links

26 <http://www.26.org.uk/>

The Writer <http://www.thewriter.co.uk>

The Chartered Institute of Marketing <http://www.cim.co.uk>

The Institute of Internal Communication (formerly The British Association of Communicators in Business) <http://www.ioic.org.uk/content/index.php>
