

# Ben Settle's Weird Copywriting Tips

## A Special Q&A Session with Ben Settle about Direct Response Copywriting

In April 2011, Ben Settle agreed to answer the best copywriting questions submitted by readers of my blog at [www.RyanHealy.com](http://www.RyanHealy.com). After a few days of collecting questions, I whittled them down into 14 concise questions.

I sent the questions to Ben and told him to feel free to eliminate any question he didn't feel like answering.

Much to my surprise, Ben answered ALL of them. In fact, he penned 5,094 words to answer the questions.

Ben's answers formed the basis of a 4-part interview series that I posted on my blog. This PDF combines all 4 parts into a single printable PDF document. Enjoy!

-Ryan M. Healy

P.S. Don't forget to visit Ben's blog at [www.BenSettle.com](http://www.BenSettle.com)

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### 1. What is the best way to get good at copywriting?

There's no one-size-fits-all answer to this.

Ask 10 different copywriters, you'll get 10 different answers.

But besides reading and studying everything I could get my hands on about the subject and writing ads out by hand, there is something else that made the whole process go faster.

And that is when I started writing every single day.

Or, at least every week day.

This has all kinds of benefits besides just getting good at writing.

It can also help you get clients and/or customers for whatever it is you sell.

True story:

Back in 2006 my freelance copywriting business hit a dry spot.

I had no client work, no prospects, no nothing. So what I did was, I spent my days writing ezine articles -- usually about 10 per day. And so, I was constantly honing my writing, persuasion and other copywriting abilities (I treated each article like it was an ad -- and they are in this sense -- to get people to click my resource box link).

This forced me to get better at writing, telling stories, structuring a persuasive argument, etc.

I also started generating traffic and leads (shocker!)

And, even better, I took the best of those articles and put them into an eBook as a free opt in bribe for my site. Not long after that, prospective clients started contacting me saying, "I read your eBook...would like to talk to you about your services..." and there was no real selling or "convincing" necessary.

They saw I could write (most copywriters are lazy and clients know this).

They saw I knew what I was talking about.

And they were somehow effected by the writing enough to contact me, so the proof I could do the job was there.

Now, I'm not saying this is the only way to do it.

Or even the fastest way, necessarily.

But that was one of the best copywriting educations I ever got. Not only in terms of the "how tos" of writing and persuasion, but also in terms of how to attract and close clients.

So write, write, write... and as you build a list, email it every day.

You'll get really good at copywriting.

You'll start getting leads for whatever you sell.

And, yes, you'll likely make money at the same time.

**2. I'd like to know more about the CREATIVE process Ben uses to create ads. Does Ben follow the same process to write every ad? Does he use a swipe file? Does he use the "Index Cards in a Shoe Box" method of Gary Halbert? What order does he do research, brainstorming, headline generation, coming up with the "Big Idea", bullets, etc.?**

There are lots of different things at play with ads, and each is different.

But let's say it's a brand new market I know nothing about.

What's the process?

First, I start with researching the market using a very specific "market analysis" formula. It pretty much lets me know everything I need to know about the market, what they do, who they are, how they think, how they buy, what TV shows they watch, what magazines they read -- if they even so much as go to the bathroom at a certain time of the day, I'll know about it. (Well, maybe I don't know THAT much about them, but you get the idea...)

Then I look at the product or service being sold.

Usually, I sell info products.

So I'll go through it and take notes, and write the bullets out as I go. I'll also get ideas for stories, appeals, ways to word things, maybe offers nobody has thought of or what-ever... and write all that down in my notes along with the bullets.

So all this stuff is dumped into a long text document.

No specific order.

No rhyme or reason.

No nothing but a bunch of random bullets, ideas, notes, scribblings, etc.

That big mess then becomes the basis for my first draft.

From there, I rearrange things into the structure I want to use. So I'll move all the headline ideas to the top where the headline will be. I'll move all the story ideas under that where the story will go. I'll cut and paste all the bullets under that. Then the closing ideas.

Then, I let it sit for a few days.

(I almost always structure my schedule where this is all done on a Friday, so I can forget about it all weekend.)

Next, I start massaging it.

Sentence by sentence by sentence.

But, I break it up into sections.

So if I get bored or stuck with the story section, I'll move on to the bullets or the close or spend time on the headline, whatever excites me at the moment.

This is kinda the hard part.

I got this giant mess in a text document.

Lots of random words, ideas, babblings, notes, whatever I wrote down (many of which won't even make sense to me even though I wrote them). But I trudge through this swamp as fast as possible so it starts to resemble something that at least makes sense. And I just keep reading through the ad until I think the main ideas and format is all there.

At that point, I start reading it out loud.

And I do that 10 times -- minimum.

The first 3 or 4 times is slow, as I'm correcting everything (spelling, grammar, ideas that don't belong, rewriting sentences, clearing up ideas that are confusing, adding in content where needed, and all that kind of stuff).

It's extremely tedious and not very much fun.

Especially when you get to the 7th or 8th time.

But it's always worth the effort.

And by the 10th reading, the ad is so tight you could probably bounce a quarter off it.

As for the last part of the question, yes, I do have a swipe file but don't really use it for anything except inspiration. Ditto with note cards -- which come in extremely handy whenever I'm stuck for ideas.

### **3. I always have trouble with that first paragraph in a sales page, any tips?**

Try the Gary Halbert "If/then" opening.

No, it's not "creative."

But it gets the job done in a snap, with minimal fuss and anxiety.

Plus there is a lot of ways this opening gets into someone's psychology. According to Eugene Schwartz (and let's face it, he was the man) the structure of the paragraph has built-in credibility. Whatever you say will be a bit more believable just by the way the words are laid out -- as the "if" implies a condition to get what's promised in the benefit described in the "then" part of the sentence.

Here is an example straight from a Gary Halbert ad:

"If you would like to know how someone can start with a simple idea... and then... generate over \$51,000,000 in sales in just one year... this is going to be the most interesting message you will ever read"

There's a lot going on in that opening.

There's an implied benefit.

A story begins to be told.

There's curiosity and it gets you sucked in.

Of course, this opening is not always the best way to go, and is not always the most effective way to do it.

But it'll at least get you started if you're stuck.

#### **4. How do you determine which emotional hot buttons to press when writing for specific niches?**

It's all about market research.

One thing you do NOT want to do is just blindly look at competing ads (even if they are supposedly making lots of money) and copy their appeals.

Yes, those other ads can be helpful.

And I do recommend combing through them and writing out the benefits you see common in multiple competing ads.

But don't blindly assume they'll appeal to your prospects.

Why?

Well, for one thing, you could be dabbling in marketing incest. That's where everyone starts looking at what everyone else is doing and then copies it thinking "that's what works!"

Sometimes they may be right and they do work.

But a lot of times, they don't.

I'll give you a real life example.

Two markets I have done a lot of work in (in the past, not recently, though) are the golf and martial arts markets. And being the John Carlton fanboy that I am (and since I have lots and lots of his golf and martial arts ads) I studied them intensely.

But you know what I discovered?

I couldn't use all the same emotional appeals he used.

And there were many appeals not in those ads that I needed to include in the ads I was writing, due to the specific market segments I was going after.

Yes, in some cases, they made sense for my market.

But while researching the market segments my clients were selling to I found myself using different emotional hot buttons, and leaving others out.

So my point is, do your homework on your market.

Don't assume anyone else's ad is hitting the right emotions for your ad.

Every ad is different, every market is different and the unique product-marketing timing relationship that exists right now is different than it was 1 year ago, 10 years ago or 50 years ago.

So you have to do the research.

You have to become one with your market (temporarily).

You have to get your hands dirty and ask the right questions of your market and find the answers (ideally by talking to people IN your market and experiencing the same pains they are when possible).

## **5. How do you get ideas for hooks in your promotional emails and sales pages? Where do you look for ideas?**

I get ideas from everything and anything.

I probably get my best ideas from movies and TV shows. I've trained my mind to always be on high alert for anything that can be useful in an ad or email. And every time I get an idea -- a headline, subject line, an analogy, a story idea, even just an interesting or unique word or piece of slang... I write it down or, at the very least, it gets stored in my subconscious for later use.

I'll give you an example.

Ever see "How The Grinch Stole Christmas"?

The live action version with Jim Carrey?

Well, there's a scene in there where the grinch and Cindy Lou Who are zipping down the mountain (slay packed with gifts) going extremely fast, thinking they may crash on mountainside.

And the Grinch says:

"...even if we're HORRIBLY MANGLED..."

Well, guess what?

I've used that in some martial arts ads and some of my emails.

Not as a "hook" necessarily, but to make the writing more interesting and fun to read. And it came as a result of just always having that "radar" on, listening for interesting phrases, ideas and concepts. The more interesting and fun your writing is to read, the more likely people are to buy.

It's not always that easy, though.

Sometimes you have to dig deep for these things.

One example would be an ad I wrote selling a grappling product to guys who were not martial arts savvy. These guys are middle aged, "Type A" personalities, and wouldn't know the difference between kung fu and kung pao chicken -- nor did they watch mixed martial arts or find the idea of wrestling around on the ground or the concept of "grappling" appealing at all.

So I had to make it sexy somehow.

The solution?

Research!

I started reading a book about grappling. And it turns out back in ancient Rome when people were thrown to the lions, some of the tougher guys (who knew grappling) fought the lions back and even killed them with their bare hands.

How cool is that?

And that instantly became my hook and story.

All the sudden grappling was made cool and exciting.

So you have to dig sometimes.

But it's always worth the effort.

## **6. How long should emails be for them to be most effective?**

There's no one magic email length.

You just say what you have to say and get out as fast as you can. If you know your list and your market, and if you know how to communicate with them in a way where they want to hear from you (where you're a bright spot in their day, not an imposition) you realize it doesn't matter.

That said, I do try to keep them under 400 words.

Less than 300 is ideal, but I don't always succeed at that.

I don't do this as a rule or anything.

I do it because my attention span sucks. And I figure, if I'd get bored of something, they will. So I follow the old adage about how long a woman's skirt should be:

"Short enough to get attention,  
long enough to cover the details..."

Sometimes that means writing an email that is 150 words.

Or it could be an email that is 2000 words!

Just have a conversation with your market. If it's long but interesting, that's okay. If it's short and interesting, that's okay too.

The only rule is don't be boring.

If you're interesting, it can't be too long.

At the same time, if you're boring, even 10 words is too long.

## **7. Since you have embraced short copy emails... does this prove the long form sales letter is finally officially dead?**

Everyone seems so anxious to pronounce long copy dead.

But it's far from being dead.

Case in point:

When I was working in the golf niche, for some reason (I still can't fathom) someone took my proven-to-work long form sales letter down and just put an order form up.

It was classic short copy:

Just a headline, a brief description of the product and offer, and a link.

I'm still not exactly sure why they took it down..

But I remember one of the guys was all about "incubating" prospects before selling them (something like that, all based on assumption based on what one of his favorite goo-roos teaches, but not one test was conducted).

So all we had was a short copy order form for weeks.

And this was in addition to doing Web 2.0 stuff.

You know... blog posts, podcasts, etc.

And hey, we did get sales with just the order form.

But still, it kind of bothered me.

I mean, seriously, why would you take down a sales letter that was working and only put up an order form without even testing it? Anyway, long story short, I convinced them to put it back up and -- sweet mother of Claude Hopkins! -- sales went way up, too.

Now, that doesn't mean every ad must be long.

Your ad should be as long as it needs to be.

A lot of it comes down to how aware (as the great Eugene Schwartz taught) your market is of your product.

If you're selling Viagra, do you need long copy?

Probably not.

Everyone knows what it is and what it does already. So you probably just need a headline and an offer. But if you're selling yet ANOTHER brand new, "ground floor" business opportunity online... you're going to have some 'splaining to do.

You have to tell them why you're different.

Why they should trust you.

What makes you unique, etc

Methinks that's going to take some long copy.

Maybe even REALLY long copy (as in 50+ pages).

Email does make this easier, though.

For example, with the products I sell on my site, I don't tell my whole story or any stories. I just do a bit of teasing, maybe some credibility building, then jump right into the benefits and offer. And the reason why is because I send emails every day. My list either already knows, likes and trusts me or they don't.

So anyway, no I don't think long copy is dead.

And, if it is, I never got the memo...

## **8. Is it really better to send emails every day to your subscribers, rather than less often?**

There was a time when I thought mailing every day was insane.

After all, wouldn't I get a bunch of unsubscribes? Wouldn't people start accusing me of spam? Wouldn't I be making my list mad and less likely to buy?

Then, I decided to try it anyway.

And guess what happened?

Yes, I got more unsubscribes... but my spam complaints went down to almost zero, and even more importantly I got a TON more sales. When I first went daily back in January 2009, I looked at the sales figures and pretty much wanted to throw up when I realized all the money I'd left on the table listening to goo-roos and other email "experts" saying to only email once per month or when you have something worth saying, yada yada yada.

There are a LOT of reasons to mail daily.

The sales are an obvious reason.

But here are a couple more that come to mind:

### *1. Positioning*

If you're REALLY an expert or (even better) a leader in your niche (and you should be striving to be seen as a leader, right?)... and you don't have something (anything!) to say each day about whatever it is you're trying to convince everyone you're an expert at... well, what kind of expert or leader are you?

Real experts can't shut up about their business.

They OOOZE their expertise all over the place.

And people love to listen to them because none of us can hear enough about our passions and/or pains.

So if you mix the two together... boom!

You almost can't lose.

Plus, if you're only mailing once per month or whatever, and your competition is mailing 3 times per week or 5 times per week, well, good luck. Because unless you have some kind of "rock star" positioning going for you, chances are you'll always be second, third or fourth fiddle behind those who are keeping in touch with your prospects.

On the other hand...

When you're in someone's inbox each day with something interesting, fun and relevant to their pains and desires, your positioning goes WAY up.

Certainly higher than the once-per-month emailers.

## *2. Procrastination*

Here's something else to think about:

Nobody can make a decision anymore. There are probably people on your list right now who are on the fence about buying from you or hiring you.

But guess what?

Unless you go after them, they'll never pull the trigger.

They'll forget all about you.

And they'll go on with their busy lives, thinking, "yeah, I'll get to that..." and never follow through on it. Instead, they'll probably buy from your competitor who IS emailing them more often. This is especially true since, due to spam filters and the hectic nature of peoples' lives, they aren't even reading all your emails.

So who do you think is going to "win"?

The marketer who mails once per month or once per week...

Or the person who's there each day with a fun, intriguing email?

Who has more of a chance of being seen at all?

If you're life was on the line, and you HAD to get the highest sales for your product, and you had 30 days to do it, would you mail once, twice, 4 times... or every single day (or as often as you could)?

The key is to write emails correctly.

Don't do what everyone else is doing -- most people only mail their list when they have something to sell or whatever. Learn how to write subject lines that make peoples' pupils dilate (from excitement, curiosity, anger, whatever) the second they read it. Learn how to write email body copy that people enjoy reading, and it's not a chore or an imposition.

Do that and you can't mail your list enough.

## **9. When approaching writing copy with a niche that already knows and trusts you but which is not familiar with the 'new concept/vision' you'll be taking, what are some of the things I should keep in mind?**

I am not 100% clear on the question, but I'll take a stab at it anyway.

First, realize your new approach may fail.

And it may fail BIG time.

But it may succeed, too.

You just never know until you test it.

I don't know if this is what you are asking or not, but what I'd do is survey my list and see what they think of this new vision/concept.

If it's a product, here's what to do:

Put up a capture page.

Tell your list what you are creating and tell them if they want to be alerted when it comes out and get it at a discount to go to that capture page and opt in.

If you get zero opt ins, it's probably DOA.

If you get a lot of people opting in, you may be on to something.

It's still not a guarantee of anything.

But it could save you lots of time and energy.

**10. Do you put yourself in a particular type of environment when you sit down to write copy? For example... do you listen to music, go to the beach, search for D.B. Cooper clues etc...?**

Not really.

Usually I listen to some jazz or movie soundtracks, set my timer, and then let the "hounds" out.

**11. Can you write a solid sales letter for high ticket products without actually owning the product yourself?**

A couple years ago I was hired to write an ad for a product that was still in production, for a brand new market I'd never sold to before. And the ad ended up not only kicking gluteus assimus, but it also beat the control that was written by a well known copywriter.

I wrote the entire ad (sans the product details) without seeing the product.

Later, I wrote the bullets after seeing the product.

But most of it was written without seeing the product details.

How is that possible?

Because 90% of the ad was written just based on market research.

The story was crafted around their pains, desires, and problems. You don't really need to talk about your weed killer all that much -- what is far more important is talking about their "crab grass."

You cannot bore someone if you talk about their problems.

So to answer the question, yes you "can" do it, if needed.

But in order to write the strongest ad possible, you'll need the product details. Especially if it's an info product or something where there are lots of moving parts.

Also, here is something else to consider:

Not long ago, I was hired to write an ad in a very competitive market where there's a lot of CPA advertising going on.

Very cut throat market.

And it was also a cesspool of marketing incest, too.

Everyone was just copying each other -- like each ad was just a bad carbon copy of a copy of a fax of another copy.

So what did I do?

I asked them to scrap their product!

And then the client and I did an intense case study of the market. After that, I took that market data (no product data -- we didn't have one now) and I "created" the product as I wrote the ad, in my head, via the benefits and promises.

I remembered hearing that big mailers do this.

They sometimes write the ad BEFORE creating the product.

And what you do is, you pretend you have unlimited super powers and can create the best product possible with all the hottest benefits and then write it. Then you use your ad as an outline for the product and try to fulfill all the benefits and claims. Whichever ones can't be fulfilled upon, you remove from the ad.

In that case you are creating sales letters without seeing the product, too.

So, just something to think about.

Again, it's ALL about the market first.

The product is secondary.

## **12. How intentional were you in getting into the markets you're in today (martial arts, golf, etc.)?**

It was completely accidental.

But, there is a valuable lesson in this for anyone who wants to write for clients.

Here's what I mean:

The martial arts market came as a result of that eBook I wrote after writing all those ezine articles back when I was devoid of any client work. Matter of fact, I got more than one big client just from that free eBook which people used to get when they opted in to my website.

I don't even know how the martial arts client found me.

It was out of the blue.

One day I get this call from someone who I'd recognized as having advertised on some of my favorite news websites (drudge, worldnetdaily, etc).

He's like, "Ben, I need help."

I didn't even have to do any selling to get the gig.

He realized he was too close to his market, needed a fresh perspective and anointed me as the guy to do it. But I think something I wrote in that eBook helped my cause -- a chapter about how to use the movie "Batman Begins" to write better copy, which was completely in line with the attitude and tone he knew his market liked.

But it was mostly accidental.

As for golf, I don't know why I got that gig.

I'd never even golfed before except on my old 1986 Nintendo system.

Heck, I had barely ever even played miniature golf!

But I'd done some work in the MLM niche and one of the guys there knew this guy selling a golf product and recommended me. Eventually it turned into a sort of partnership type model -- where I got paid on the sales of one of the products.

Ultimately, it didn't work out.

And that's just how it goes sometimes.

But there is one valuable take away from that, too:

Both of the markets I was selling to are similar. And doing those ads simultaneously was very easy. The point being, if you can find clients who share the same market (but are not competitors) writing ads will always be a LOT easier and faster, with you doing a much better job.

Because again, it's all about the market.

And you will know them better than anyone else.

### **13. How long does it take you to write a full sales letter, start to finish? How many sales letters do you write per year, on average?**

Even as little as a couple years ago it'd take anywhere from 4-8 weeks to write a decent ad (from research to final edit).

Today?

I can usually do it in half the time.

A lot of it is just from writing lots and lots of emails. I have not only written hundreds of emails for my own business, but I have written hundreds of emails for clients, too.

(Sometimes I think I'm gonna turn into an email at this rate...)

That's another reason to email daily, by the way.

You'll get so much faster and better at writing. You'll also get really good at structuring a persuasive argument in as few words as possible. Most ads are way too wordy and bloated. People who write lots of emails don't seem to have this problem.

I don't know how many sales letters I write on average.

Never really thought about it.

Last couple years I wrote a lot -- both for my own products and my clients.

This year, I seem to be writing more emails than sales letters, which suits me just fine. But it all depends. And I will probably end up writing a lot of sales letters later this year for a series of products the client who currently has me on retainer has in the bullpen.

So that's my long bloated "copywriter" answer.

The short answer is... I don't know.

### **14. Why don't your sales letters contain any mega-headlines or yellow highlighting??**

Sounds like someone has been reading Mr. Subtle's cartoons.

By "mega headlines" I'll assume you mean the long 30+ word headlines that are all the rage in the Internet marketing goo-roo world.

Sometimes I do use long (even "mega") headlines.

But it's pretty rare.

Most often I try to keep them around 16 words. Any more than that can often be cut into a short (with big font) headline and a smaller sub-headline which is easier for the eye to read and the brain to digest. (Something, ironically, I learned from observing Mr. Subtle's cartoons...)

Even better is this:

Take the big appeal of the headline and then bullet point the other benefits underneath it. I do that more and more these days, and it seems to work pretty well most of the time.

Here's the important thing to remember:

The whole point of the headline is to get the ad read.

You don't usually need 50 words to do that.

I'm not saying mega headlines don't work or can't work. But each ad is different and there is no set length that always works best. You just say what you have to say to get them to keep reading.

If that takes 25 words, so be it.

If only one word gets the job done, that's fine, too.

As for the second part of the question...

I do use yellow highlighting.

I just don't use it excessively.

It's especially important for the skimmers. I write the subheads throughout the ad for the skimmers (that tell the general story on their own) and use highlighting to draw attention to certain dramatic or intriguing points I think will keep the reader's interest (based on what I've studied about the market, of course).

It's all about increasing readership.

But my opinion is overdoing highlighting is a mistake.

I once heard Matt Furey quote an old Chinese saying that goes, "any strength overextended is no longer a strength" and I think that's very true with writing ads.

A lot of it is just common sense.

It's not really about fireworks and goo-roo persuasion "choke holds."

**\*\*\* SPECIAL OFFER FOR RYAN HEALY'S READERS ONLY \*\*\***  
*Expires Thursday, April 21st at 12 midnight Pacific!*

By the way, if you like the copywriting tips you've gotten in this interview, then you're going to LOVE Ben Settle's Copywriting Grab Bag.

The Copywriting Grab Bag has been endorsed by quite a few well-known marketers, including Ken McCarthy, Terry Dean, and Leon Altman, a copywriter who's written copy for Apple and been featured in AWAI's Monthly Copywriting Genius.

Not to mention, I've endorsed it, too.

Right now, **Ben is offering my readers \$50 off the normal price** by [ordering through this link](#).

Even better, **I'll throw in an extra bonus gift:** an 18-page PDF report I wrote called "6 Forms of Proof that Boost Web Copy Conversions." In this report you'll learn...

- How to convert even the most skeptical of prospects into paying customers.
- 25 different forms of proof and how to use them in your sales copy.
- Not just WHAT forms of proof to use... but HOW to use them, too.
- *And much more.*

This 18-page PDF report is yours free for instant download when you buy through this link: <http://clickora.com/bensettle>

But the discount and the bonus gift are **only available until TONIGHT, Thursday night, April 21, 2011.**

**Please note:** To get the \$50 discount, you must enter the coupon code HEALY at checkout. Do this before you enter any information — and make sure you click the “Apply” button. You will see the price reduce by \$50 when you do this. Here’s what that looks like:



The screenshot shows a shopping cart titled "Your Shopping Cart". It contains one item: "The Copywriting Grab Bag" with a quantity of 1. Below the item list, there is a section for a coupon code. The text "Coupon code (optional):" is followed by a text input field containing "HEALY" and an "Apply" button. A red oval highlights the input field and button, and a red arrow points to the "Apply" button.

Now click the link below to learn more about The Copywriting Grab Bag — and **claim your \$50 discount and free 18-page PDF report.**

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