

5 Secrets to Writing Non-Sucky Copy For ANY Medium

**talking
shrimp**



Laura Belgray
Copywriting. Jumbo style.



5 Secrets to Non-Sucky Copy



Ever write something and for some reason you can't pinpoint, it just doesn't seem to *pop*?

You know you wrote it "right," with perfect sentence structure and everything.

And you're sure you picked a fascinating, provocative topic.

But still, when you read it back, you find yourself skimming over huge chunks. You realize that what you wrote is - horrors - boring.

Unreadable or un-listenable.

In other words, sucky.

Well, that's very good. Not that your copy sucks, but that you're aware it sucks.

Because with the five tools I'm about to share, whether it's a blog post, a sales page, or a 30-second TV spot, you can make it *not* suck.

Better than that: you'll make it so sharp and engaging that your audience won't be able to tear themselves away.

Even if you think your writing is flawless, use these tools to run a suck-scan. Just like you'd run a virus check on your computer.

Ready?

The five secrets to make your copy INSTANTLY non-sucky require you to CUT THE CRAPP.

5 Secrets to Non-Sucky Copy



That means, get rid of anything that's:

1. Cliché
2. Redundant
3. Ambiguous
4. Pretentious
5. Passive (as in, passive voice.)

Let's have a closer look at what constitutes the five secret steps to cutting the CRAPP.

1. C: Cliché

We all use clichés when we talk. They're good shorthand. If you say, "I have this guy wrapped around my little finger," we know what you mean. You don't have to explain, "I can manipulate him to do anything because he so badly wants my approval."

But we'll pay more attention if you say "I just have to smile, and he'll drive me to the airport or lick my sweaty feet."

Clichés get the point across, but they don't spark the imagination. Most of them were brilliant the first time someone said them: "Ants in his pants." "Splitting hairs." "Dirt cheap." "That's the tail wagging the dog." "Time to shit or get off the pot."

Pretty good, right? If you'd never heard it before, you'd be like, "Dumb as a stump' - did you make that up? That's genius!"

Now, though, we're so used to hearing these sayings that they barely even register. They're like a t-shirt that's been through the wash a thousand times. Comfortable, but colorless.

5 Secrets to Non-Sucky Copy



So if you want vivid copy, the first thing to do is comb yours for clichés. Not just folksy sayings and metaphors, but also words that get lumped together all the time, like:

reckless abandon
heart and soul
senseless tragedy
hopeless romantic
eternal optimist
leaps and bounds
tried and true
fast and furious
sage wisdom
crushing blow
card-carrying democrat

Any words that sound too natural together? That you find yourself writing without thinking? They sound right because that's the way you always hear them. Which makes them clichés. So cut them out. Then, think of a more original way to say them.

2. R: Redundant

Run your writing the way you would a company: every word that isn't doing anything special or useful, you fire. Those are unhelpful, and a drain. Like well-paid employees who have no ideas at the staff meeting and spend the day surfing porn.

Extra words don't just take up space. They suck the power from your writing. Compare these two sentences:

Here is an example of the kind of sentence, which is seen to contain a few too many extra words.

5 Secrets to Non-Sucky Copy



This sentence has extra words. (Except now it doesn't.)

How do you cut the clutter from a sentence? By losing every word you can without changing the meaning. Be ruthless. You'll know when you've gone too far.

Keep a special eye out for little modifiers like:

a bit

kind of

sort of

really

fairly

pretty

a little

more or less

somewhat

quite

That stuff dulls all the edges. It wipes out the oomph. Which is why we use it, especially when we talk. Hey, it's uncomfortable saying exactly what we mean.

"I'm fairly certain that you kind of want me to leave" is a lot easier than "I know you want me to leave." The second way feels too direct and bold.

But direct and bold is good. It's what writing should be.

(Notice there's way less impact if I write, "But being direct and bold is actually a pretty good thing. It's really what writing should more or less be.")

3. A: Ambiguous

If your friend called you and said, "That guy I slept with was a total douche to me at the party," would you say, "OMG, no way! I can't believe he was a douche"?

5 Secrets to Non-Sucky Copy



No, you wouldn't. You'd ask, "What do you mean? A douche *how?* What did he do?"

Right? You'd press till your friend explained:

"Well, he walked right by me three times without saying hi, then later pinched the flab on my waist and said I should skip the nachos."

OK. Now we're getting somewhere. *Yes. Agreed. He was a douche.*

People don't want vague statements. They want concrete details that paint a picture.

When you get ambiguous - writing something that could mean several different things or doesn't mean anything - your audience gets bored and distrustful.

Here's an example:

"I was in a dark place."

That could mean anything. Were you:
consumed by jealousy of your more successful coworker?
sleeping till noon and spending the day in your dirty bathrobe?
living on the streets and turning tricks for crack?
drinking champagne in a dimly lit nightclub?

We don't know unless you show us. And it's so much more compelling when you do.

Here's another:

"Learn how to step into your power!"

5 Secrets to Non-Sucky Copy



I keep seeing personal coaching websites that say things like this. You've lost me there, coach.

Now, if you say: "I'll help you discover what you love to do, and how to make money doing it," I know what that is.
Or maybe it's: "Learn to get stuff done, and manage your time so it doesn't manage you." That, I also get.

"Step into your power"? Not so much. That one gets an "A". For Ambiguous.

So here's how to cut out the ambiguous stuff: look through your writing for anything that doesn't provide a clear picture. Anything that doesn't already answer the question, "what does that look like?"

Then, retell it like it's hot gossip. We don't want broad strokes. We want the little details. The dirt.

And then, once you've made it specific, make it MORE specific.

More specific is always more entertaining. More funny. More better. Whether it's a TV ad, a sales page, a website bio, or a novel.

"After dinner, she asked for a divorce" is OK. But not as good as:
"After seconds of tuna casserole, she asked for a divorce."

"This Friday, Kevin Bacon makes trouble with his wild dancing." Eh.
"Wild" how? What kind of dancing? How about:
"This Friday, Kevin Bacon raises hell with his sinful jazz moves."

See? Details are magic.

5 Secrets to Non-Sucky Copy



4. P: Pretentious

Remember this: one should abstain from embellishing one's prose in the service of bestowing it with a more distinguished tonality.

Got that?

I didn't think so. That's because it was a really convoluted, pretentious way of saying, **don't fancy up your writing.**

It won't sound like you, it probably won't make sense, and it will DEFINITELY be a drag to read. Or listen to.

So write the way you would talk. And by that, I mean the way you'd talk to a friend - not how you'd speak in a British Parliament session.

Sometimes that means breaking language rules.

Would you say, "that's the friend with whom I car pool?"

No. You'd say "that's the friend I car pool with." Even though you know it isn't proper English.

I'd rather hear or read incorrect, natural-sounding grammar than the awkward, teacher-approved kind, any day. Of course, proper grammar isn't always awkward. Not at all. But when it is, skip it. Or say it another way.

(Like, "that's the friend who carpools with me" or "that's my carpool friend.")

And remember to keep it simple:

Skip the 10-dollar word when a 5-cent word can say the same thing.

5 Secrets to Non-Sucky Copy



Some people don't like this advice. I recently gave a seminar on this topic, and a woman raised her hand.

"I know a lot of big words," she informed us, "like *ecumenical*. And I like to utilize them in my writing. Are you saying that I should refrain from doing that?"

No. Don't "refrain" from doing it. Just knock it off.

My question for her was, *why use the big words?* Are you using them when they're the best, most accurate words to say what you want to say? Or do you use them when a simpler word would do just as well?

For instance, "utilize." Why not just say you "use" big words?

Ms. Ecumenical wouldn't give it up. She said, "well, I was told by one of my supervisors that everything I write should be at a sixth-grade level. I think that's sad. Why should we have to dumb everything down?"

My answer:

What's wrong with writing at a level a sixth grader can understand? That's the year when my elementary school - not an especially hard school - had us reading some of the best books ever written. Like "Huck Finn" and "To kill a Mockingbird." I wouldn't call those books "dumbed down."

11-year-olds might not get your full meaning. But if they can process your sentence structure, then it will be a breeze for us big people. And we like it when it's a breeze. We stay focused on what you're saying, instead of stopping to untangle your sentences or look up your big, fancy words.

Try reading your copy out loud. If a sentence feels uncomfortable coming out of your mouth, then cut it out of your copy.

5 Secrets to Non-Sucky Copy



Now, I have to go look up *ecumenical*.

OK, I'm back. And totally ecumenical. Time for the second "P." The final piece of CRAPP.

5. P: Passive Voice

To be, or not to be?

If you want non-sucky copy, the answer is *not* to be.

The verb *to be* is the centerpiece of the passive voice, a form of speech, which weakens the impact of your writing. Whenever possible, ~~it should be avoided~~ you should avoid it.

To see if you've used the passive voice, look through your writing for forms of to be, such as:

is
are
am
was
were
will be
should be
has been
have been

And, a frequent substitute for *to be*:

get
gets
got

5 Secrets to Non-Sucky Copy



A passive construction takes one of these verb forms and pairs it with a second verb, in the passive tense. As in, "is served," "got killed," "shouldn't be touched," "were eaten."

This structure flips everything around by turning the object of an action (the thing or person being acted upon) into the subject of the sentence.

Take the song lyric, *there was an old lady who swallowed a fly.*

It's in the active voice.

Subject of the sentence: the old lady, who's the subject, or do-er, of the action, "swallowed."

Object of the sentence: the fly, who's the object of the action. He's the one on the receiving end.

But what if we changed it to: *There was a fly who was swallowed by an old lady?*

That's the passive voice. We've turned the object, the fly, into the subject of the sentence. Not as catchy, is it?

Let's say we make it: *There was a fly who was swallowed?*

Now we've 86'd the old lady all together. That's fine if we want to make the song all about the fly, and not about whoever swallowed the fly. In that case, the passive voice is useful. It's necessary. Go for it.

Here are examples of *unnecessary* passive voice, along with alternatives in active voice:

PASSIVE: *You will be shown how to live the life of your dreams.*

ACTIVE: *I will show you how to live the life of your dreams.*

PASSIVE: *You might get confused by this rule.*

ACTIVE: *This rule might confuse you.*

5 Secrets to Non-Sucky Copy



PASSIVE: *More bacon has been consumed by Americans in the past two days than in all of 2008.*

ACTIVE: *Americans consumed more bacon in the past two days than in all of 2008.*

PASSIVE: *The paper should be recycled after it gets read.*

ACTIVE: *Please recycle the paper after you read it.*

It might surprise you to discover how often you use the passive voice. Why do we use it so much?

Because it's easier.

It assigns less responsibility to whoever or whatever is doing the action.

And that makes it less powerful.

So when do we want to use the passive voice?

There are two situations where it works better:

- When we want to draw attention to the object, the thing or person being acted upon:

Balloon Boy's father should be locked up for life.

It's about Balloon Boy's dad, not the prison system. So this works better than:

They should lock up Balloon Boy's father for life.

- When the do-er, the object of the action is unknown, unseen, or unimportant:

Their house was burglarized.

Most donuts get baked early in the morning.

Celebrities always get spotted when they're trying to look "inconspicuous."

5 Secrets to Non-Sucky Copy



Bonus Section

I can't stop at one set of five. So here's a quick, five-part coda.

Once you've cut the CRAPP, add the SNAPP.

1. Story
2. Natural
3. Authentic
4. Picture
5. Point of view

1. S: Story

We all love stories. When we hear a story, we pay attention. Story doesn't have to mean "once upon a time." It doesn't need to be a complete tale. It can be a single sentence:

Yesterday, when I was at CVS looking for something to make my blinding migraine go away, I had an epiphany about branding.

This Thanksgiving, while the family's eating Aunt Marcia's dried out turkey and fighting about health care reform, why not sneak off from the table and watch a marathon of Scrubs?

Anything with a hint of drama or event - that's story. Put it in your copy.

2. N: Natural

Once you've said bye-bye to the parts that sound pretentious, see that every bit sounds natural. Ironically, that's not how it usually comes out in

5 Secrets to Non-Sucky Copy



the first round of writing. It often takes several drafts before my copy sounds like it really came from me.

3. A: Authentic

As in, authentically yours. Make your copy original. It's so easy to rip off ideas without meaning to. That doesn't mean you shouldn't steal. You should definitely steal, but not from your direct industry. If you're writing a blog post, don't steal from a blog post. If you're writing an ad, don't steal from another ad. At least not a recent one.

For instance, if you decide, "I want my Hot Dog Hut ad to be like last year's Wendy's ad," the result will be as fresh as year-old ground meat.

Instead, why not take inspiration from dialogue you heard on the street? Or a book, or a painting, or famous movie?

How about this: a spot called "Hot Dog Day Afternoon," where the bank robber demands more mustard or he'll start shooting.

Go ahead, Hot Dog Hut. I'm not using that one.

Find yourself stuck on someone else's idea? Thinking, "the headline for that guy's Baking Bootcamp sales page is the only headline that works for my Baking Bootcamp sales page"?

Well, first of all, you should change the name of your program. That one is his. Then, look elsewhere for headline inspiration. Browse dating book titles. Golfing magazines. Anything totally unrelated to baking. Then, when you find phrasing you like, you can adapt it.

Maybe you've seen headlines for marketing courses promising, "Learn To

5 Secrets to Non-Sucky Copy



Be A Marketing Ninja - Guaranteed." You probably shouldn't use the word "ninja" for your marketing course. It's overused in that field, and marketing geeks have seen it everywhere. But piecrust geeks are a different story. So why not: "Become A Dessert Ninja In 60 Days."

Always steal your ideas - or let's say "borrow" them - from a different category or era or medium. Then, give them a new context, a fresh angle.

4. P: Picture

Paint one with your writing - wherever you have the chance. For visual mediums like film and TV, there's already a picture there. So this "P" doesn't really apply.

But if your medium is the written word, use those details we talked about. Give us something we can see in our minds.

Here's a good test: if you wanted pictures with your copy, would an illustrator know what to draw?

5. P: Point of View

Give a point of view to everything you write. Express your own, or tap into someone else's. Your copy will be more personal and relatable.

Here's an example:

If I write about the importance of being generous, I could just string together dull quotations about giving and receiving. But instead, I'll talk about my old classmate Wendy Woronoff. We still make jokes about her after 25 years, because all through high school, she would never lend anyone a pencil from her precious, well-stocked Hello Kitty case.

5 Secrets to Non-Sucky Copy



Nobody wants to be a Wendy Woronoff.

That's like saying, nobody wants to be remembered as selfish. Except with a point of view.

That's it. We've now completed our final "P."

So go, cut the CRAPP, put in the SNAPP, and see if you don't turn out some non-sucky copy. I'll bet it's even damn good.

Please feel free to copy and distribute with attribution.

That means post this on your blog, hand it out to your bowling league, pass it around all you want as long as it has this info on it:

Written by Laura Belgray
Talking Shrimp, Inc.
www.talkingshrimp.com

Did you like these copy tips? Then you'll like my website. Visit www.talkingshrimp.com to get help with your copy, comment on my blog, watch my work videos, say hi, or just lurk. I always welcome lurkers.

About Laura

Laura Belgray, owner and creative director of Talking Shrimp, has been a professional writer for nearly two decades and won big, fat awards for her work.

She's written promos, launch campaigns, upfronts, online content, book chapters, full show episodes and more for: VH1, Nick at Nite, Nickelodeon, TV Land, The N, Bravo, Sundance Channel, Ion, WE, Lifetime, Oxygen, HBO, TBS, the CW and USA.

Celebrities who have brought Laura's scripts to life include Joan Rivers, Ted Danson, Vanessa Williams, Roseanne Barr, Kelly Ripa, Adam West, Moon Zappa, Isabel Sanford and Sherman Hemsley. She taught Mr. Hemsley, AKA George Jefferson, to moonwalk.

Laura's writing has earned numerous honors, including the big daddy of promo awards, Promax Best of Show. This was for her favorite project ever, "Tony 'n' T: TV Land In Demand," a rap video starring Tony Randal and Mr. T.

When not writing for TV, Laura likes watching TV. And when not watching TV, she enjoys traveling, eating in great restaurants, and talking about TV. She speaks decent Spanish, halting Italian, and a few obscene phrases in Ancient Greek.

Laura lives in New York City, where she grew up – back when it was dirty and everyone got mugged. She kind of misses that.

