



**INFORMATION HIGHWAYMAN**  
**ACE COPYWRITER & ATTENTION-THIEF FOR HIRE**



**D**ESCRPTION of *all the PROCESSES & REQUIREMENTS entailed in a full COPYWRITING PROJECT, created by INFORMATION HIGHWAYMAN, for the edification of his EXCELLENT CLIENTS & LOYAL FANS:—*

**BEFORE STARTING, I CLEARLY STATE THE INTENDED PROJECT OUTCOME, AND REFER BACK TO IT OFTEN DURING THE STAGES DESCRIBED BELOW.**



**§1. CHARACTERIZATION**

*This stage is a prerequisite for any project, as it involves the essential research & conceptualization required to develop great copy. In it, I define “The Question”—ie: What are we really selling? Put another way, if our ideal prospect is someone named Alex, what does s/he want? To answer The Question, I:—*

- **RESEARCH THE PRODUCT/SERVICE BEING SOLD.** Based on the materials you provide, on interviews with you and your staff, and on my own research, I learn everything I can about the background, features, specifications and distinctives of what we’re selling. If it’s already on the market, I look at how it’s already being sold, and at what price. I scour any prior promotional material you may have; and if possible I sample the product myself. This process involves *a lot* of time, and *a lot* of discussion with you. But once it’s done, I still have to:—



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- RESEARCH OUR CURRENT AND/OR PROSPECTIVE CUSTOMER BASE. To be sure the copy is well-targeted, I have to know Alex's typical personality, interests, knowledge, needs, concerns, problems and fears—and also the level of affordance I can expect to work with. I spend a lot of time analyzing any demographic data you have, looking at how similar products are targeted in your market, surveying industry norms, strategies, styles and personae...and generally getting to know Alex very well. I'll then draw conclusions about what I consider effective, any *de facto* standards to keep in mind, and elements I want to incorporate or avoid. Once I know all this, I can—
  
- WRITE A PERSONA PROFILE FOR ALEX. Just as if I were describing a real person, I describe Alex, focusing of course, on traits and characteristics which will be important for targeting the copy:–
  - Age, education, wealth & sex: is Alex male or female; old or young; highly educated, self-educated or not educated at all; rich, poor, or in between?
  - Attitude & disposition: is Alex generally skeptical or credulous; likely to be busy or have time free; actively seeking the product we're offering or just browsing?
  - Familiarity: is Alex already knowledgeable about our product or market; will some education be required; or does he *think* he knows a lot when he doesn't?
  - Problems & fears: what are the specific problems Alex wants to solve, and why? What worries him?
  - Other points of interest: perhaps we're targeting a specific business client. What's his title? Perhaps there's some political or ideological belief Alex is likely to have.
  
- DETERMINE THE RELEVANT NEEDS ALEX WANTS FULFILLED. Now that I know Alex, I can figure out what s/he wants from our product or service. To do this, I start with the product itself and work backwards, as follows:–
  1. List all marketable features.
  2. List the reasons for including these features.
  3. List how each feature connects with Alex's desires.
  4. Determine the emotional root of each desire.
  
- DEFINE THE UNIQUE SELLING PROPOSITION (USP). With all this preceding information gathered, I can now work out what it is about what we're selling that should set it apart in Alex's mind as *the* choice—and emphasize this difference when developing the copy. Once I know this, I can:–

- FIND THE “BIG IDEA”. If the USP is what makes the *product* uniquely valuable to Alex, the Big Idea is what makes the *copy* uniquely valuable. It’s the concept, analogy, story, metaphor, motif, principle or thought which hooks Alex into reading. It should:–
  - Be based on the Unique Selling Proposition.
  - Anchor the copy, following the SNUB IT acronym by: being Simple to grasp (short enough to describe in two sentences), telling Alex something New and genuinely Unique, in a Bold way which promises a real Impact on a Timely issue in his/her life.
  - Appeal to Alex’s desire to know something that no one else does.
  - Imply a benefit.
  - Treat Alex with intelligence, rather than trying bully or take advantage of him.
  
- ESTABLISH A VOICE. Although strong copy is almost invariably conversational in tone, different people will have different conversations. Here, I review any styles or motifs I think I’d like to use based on the research and conceptualization I’ve done, expand on them, consider alternatives, and come to some definite decisions about the voice to use when speaking to Alex. This leads into the final step of the characterization stage, which is to...
  
- WRITE THE COPY PERSONA. I now have a clear idea of the distinctive stylistic direction I’ll be following, motifs I’ll be playing off, and the voice I’ll be using—so I write a brief description of these major elements. This establishes “who I am” as the writer, and keeps me on track as the project unfolds.



## §2. INFORMATION ARCHITECTURE

*This stage is all about defining the specific elements of content we need, and the relationships between them. When writing complete websites, this stage is obviously quite extensive; conversely, for a single page it will be far less so.*

- ENUMERATE AND GATHER ALL REQUIRED CONTENT. Before beginning the process of creating new content and incorporating what we already have, I first make sure I *know* exactly what we have—and what we need. I enumerate the specific pages and elements

required to achieve the Project's Outcome, and confirm where responsibility lies for each. This includes not only the copy and any markup or stylesheets, but also less obvious items such as:-

- logos and taglines;
  - photos and images;
  - client testimonials and third party reviews;
  - biographies and background info;
  - guarantees, terms & conditions, and price lists;
  - contact details.
- CREATE DOCUMENTS AND/OR SITE MAPS. Once I know everything which must be included, I spend a goodly amount of time deciding the best way to organize it all. This process focuses especially on how to best guide Alex through interacting with the copy in the most desirable and comfortable ways. I list all the pages and/or sections we need, and demarcate important items or elements. Once this is done, I can spend some time playing with the arrangement:-
- COMPOSE WIREFRAMES. This usually involves a lot of drawing and cutting with actual bits of paper. It's fun. I'll create pieces for each important element, move them about, resize and jigsaw them until I've developed a layout which is as effective as possible. I concentrate firstly on clearly presenting everything which needs to be presented; and secondly on guiding Alex through the copy as we'd like in such a way that s/he always feels comfortable and in control. If you also have a designer involved in the project (and you should), I'll work with him or her during this process.



### §3. HOME, LANDING & BROCHURE PAGE(S) COPY DEVELOPMENT

*Now I start on the content-creation proper. Beginning with the homepage or its corollary, and then moving on to the various other product or services (brochure) pages, I:-*

- CREATE COPY OUTLINES. Here I list everything I *may* want to include in the copy itself. Then I pare this list down to the most essential items, based on ballpark word ranges, and decide on a rough order. This is based on a progression which follows the Four Ps, wherein the copy:-

1. PROMISES to benefit Alex in a tangible way (often by addressing the “fifth P”: Alex’s problem); then
2. PICTURES the promise fulfilled, to create a mental commitment; then
3. PROVES that the promise is genuine and reasonable, and that Alex’s doubts are unfounded; and finally
4. PUSHES for commitment with a strong offer and call to action.

➤ DEFINE THE PRIMARY AND SECONDARY COPY KEYPHRASES. If necessary, I’ll decide on ideal keyphrases to include in the copy. Where possible, keyphrases should be:–

- well searched: Alex should be both searching on, and likely to convert off them;
- likely to get a good ranking on search engine results pages (SERPs);
- included in the <title> and meta description at least once;
- included in the copy at least three times;
- included sensibly in an <img> element’s alt attribute at least once;
- included in an <h1> and <h2> element at least once each;
- included in the URI (page address) at least once;
- omitted from any anchor text on the homepage.

➤ DEVELOP HEADLINES. These should evoke strong, actionable emotions Alex already has, and provoke interest by suggesting benefits and arousing curiosity. Ideally, a headline will:–

- incorporate The Question and the Big Idea;
- adhere to the Four Us (useful, urgent, unique & unequivocal);
- incorporate the primary and/or secondary keyphrases where intelligent to do so;
- present a proposition to get Alex nodding (avoiding a “yeah right” response);
- offer a reward for reading;
- contain specifics to make it more intriguing and/or believable;
- include a proposed transaction.

➤ DEVISE LEDES. The lede is the first part of the copy after a headline. It’s particularly crucial for drawing Alex into the body copy, and for powering the rest of the pitch. It should establish rapport or relevance, set up a need—and especially make a promise which Alex strongly desires to have fulfilled. The homepage lede creates the foundation for developing all the rest of the site’s copy.

- **ESTABLISH NON-RATIONAL HOOKS.** These are the subconscious & emotional causes of Alex's buying decision—the things which really make him or her want what we're selling. They're largely developed from The Question, using the following techniques:–
  - Tell stories to develop Alex's trust and to create a mental commitment by having him imagine buying something he already wants. Where appropriate (and it usually is), I find a powerful analogy to use as a motif throughout the copy.
  - Ask questions to get Alex thinking and engage him more deeply.
  - Describe benefits rather than features.
  - Develop reciprocity by providing useful information Alex didn't know before.
  - Create a positive emotional investment via the major drivers: fear, greed, guilt, exclusivity, anger, salvation, or flattery .
  - Trigger the rational hook response; for example, by using the words “because” or “therefore” to lead Alex subconsciously into justifying his desire to buy.
  
- **ESTABLISH RATIONAL HOOKS.** These are the conscious & reasonable causes of Alex's buying decision—the ways in which he may persuade (or dissuade) himself to act on the existing desire we've evoked. They're largely developed from the product description itself, with particular focus of course on the USP. Rational hooks should do the following:–
  - use a problem/solution model to clearly inform Alex of the specific benefits of buying;
  - highlight specific, objective features of the product, inasmuch as they benefit Alex, while avoiding vague, unsupported, unquantifiable, or obviously subjective claims;
  - anticipate barriers or objections in a logical order, and rationally defuse them;
  - include effective proofs, such as testimonials, reviews, guarantees, and independent verification. Specific figures are often ideal;
  - provide incentives, such as free shipping, special deals, perks, and so on.
  
- **DEVELOP THE CALL(S) TO ACTION (CTA).** This is a vastly undervalued stage in the development of a site's copy and user interaction model. Without strong calls to action, Alex must infer what to do, and may not take the actions we'd like. A good CTA will dramatically improve usability—and thus conversions—by removing the guesswork involved in using a site, increasing Alex's confidence and comfort level. A CTA should:–

- Throw a “monkey’s fist”—that is, present a small offer Alex can easily say “yes” to, and which can be expanded on later (the name comes from the small ball and twine attached to the mooring ropes of a ship, and thrown first to make reeling these in easy).
- State the offer clearly, strongly, and as a culmination to the copy.
- Overcome Alex’s fear of making a bad buying choice by providing iron-clad guarantees.
- Include an alternative. A or B choices make a simple “no” psychologically harder.
- Employ the principle of scarcity to prompt immediate action.
- If possible, play to instant gratification with a free trial or immediate access.
- Where sensible, include a postscript (because it’s guaranteed to get read).



#### §4. CONVERSION PAGE(S) COPY DEVELOPMENT

*A conversion page is where Alex is taken clicking a call to action. It may be for buying our product, subscribing to a service, signing up for a newsletter—or whatever. There may be more than one conversion page, but usually one will be primary. In addition to the copywriting process already described, there are other principles which motivate or help ensure conversion—as such, they’re likely to be advisable on the conversion page, if not also on the pages leading up to it:–*

- ADDRESS SECURITY CONCERNS. Many users are hesitant to divulge personal details online. This can be mitigated to a large degree by:–
  - requiring only information which is absolutely essential to the signup process,
  - explaining why this information is needed,
  - providing your own contact details in full,
  - including trust logos if you’re using security vendors, and
  - linking to a robust privacy policy.
- DEVELOP AN APPROPRIATE GUARANTEE & RETURNS POLICY. “Risk reversal” can be a useful added motivator to conversion. Stronger guarantees make conversion more likely *and* returns *less* likely. A lifetime warranty, for example, is unlikely to be claimed compared to a six-month warranty.

- INCLUDE AVATARS OR SPOKESPERSONS. Presenting a human or quasi-human face at the commitment stage can improve conversion; people are more inclined to trust and relate to an avatar than to an impersonal form.
- IF POSSIBLE, MAKE A “BACHELOR’S OFFER”. Offering something which requires little commitment to get something of value makes a conversion very likely; for example, a free trial. If the product is really as good as it should be, Alex will probably buy later.
- IF POSSIBLE, MAKE IT EXCLUSIVE. Finding a way to make Alex feel like he’s getting something which other people aren’t is an excellent added motivator. Clubs, societies, special privileges etc can be used to push a conversion.
- DON’T REQUIRE REGISTRATION BEFORE CONVERSION. An inline registration process, where Alex can submit his or her details in a logical sequence during the submission process, is preferable to a monolithic registration page.
- PROVIDE A MEANS FOR INSTANT CONTACT. Alex shouldn’t have to open an email client, copy and paste any text, or do any work whatsoever except enter some *basic* details (typically only a name, email address & message) in order to instantly contact us.
- EMPHASIZE THE EASE WITH WHICH ALEX CAN COMMIT. With all of the above considerations in place, it’s useful to encourage immediate action by highlighting how quick and simple it is to convert.
- EXTEND A NEW OFFER FOLLOWING SUBMISSION. Take advantage of Alex’s expressed interest by presenting some further action to take after s/he has committed. This can be anything: ranging from, for example, a two-for-one deal to following us on Twitter—whatever is most appropriate and useful in view of the Objective.



## §5. OTHER CONTENT DEVELOPMENT

*Any pages enumerated in stage (2) now need to have copy written for them. Typically, at least one interest page (“About” pages, biographies, company information, etc) will need to be formulated. Additionally, terms & conditions may need to be either written from scratch, or reformatted for web presentation, and other miscellaneous pages may need to be created as well.*





## §6. REVISION

*Your feedback—in objective, factual language—is vital if I'm to produce quality, polished work that accurately fulfills the Project's Objective. Although I keep the communication channels open throughout the Project, the revision stage gives us a particular opportunity to step back and review...*

- SOLICIT FEEDBACK ON ALL CONTENT & REVISE ACCORDINGLY. Note that I won't always accept your revision requests without contest. If you ask for a change which I believe would be unwise, I'll make a counter-recommendation, or try to glean the reasons behind your request to see if there's a better way to implement it.
- EDIT ALL COPY. This is a painstaking process, constituting a good part of the project's timeframe. Spelling & grammar is double-checked, all copy is read aloud, and any outstanding thorns in my side are given whatever attention is needed to resolve them.

