



## Literate manslaughter and the vital importance of a strong opening paragraph

As with any communication challenge these days, it is absolutely vital to get your message over as quick as you can and to 'hook' the reader.

'Hook'. 'Stop'. 'Interest'. Whatever you choose to call it...

Personally, I've found that grabbing them by the throat – metaphorically speaking of course, works a whole lot better...

There is little doubt that the web is now having an incredibly negative effect in areas of contemporary communication. People now have got into the habit of short sharp message delivery and response.

This is reducing attention span to an even lower point than the depressing depths to which they have already plummeted to in the current marketplace.

So, copy has to work harder than ever. Subtlety doesn't work in our business.

Never has, in actual fact. And, in these incredibly tough times for marketers, it must be avoided like the plague...

Latest figures suggest that you have 2.8 seconds. That's how long people take to decide whether or not to read your letter. *(It's pretty much the same with ads too, perhaps slightly less. If you don't believe me, just watch someone reading the morning paper...)*

Now, if that fact doesn't focus your mind when you're preparing your next draft, you are in the wrong business.

As someone said to me at a workshop I was giving recently "That's a pretty scary scenario...."

You better believe it. There's no tougher challenge in contemporary communication and that's not even debatable...

# ALCHEMIS



Andy Owen  
Director  
Andy Owen Associates Limited  
Number One  
Highfield Road  
Hall Green  
Birmingham  
West Midlands  
B28 0EL

16 March 2004

Dear Andy

Let's keep it simple. Please tick the relevant boxes and fax or post it back to us.

- I have never heard of Alchemis
- I have no need for a new business agency
- I use a new business agency
- I would like to find out more
- Never darken my door again

Thank you.

Yours sincerely,

Amanda Francis  
Director

**P.S. In case you were wondering, Alchemis is the longest established (and best) new business agency in the market.**

Fittcroft House 114-116 Charing Cross Rd London WC2H 0JR T 020 7836 3678 F 020 7836 6495 E amanda@alchemis.co.uk  
Alchemis Ltd. Registered in England No. 2977062

When I show this at conferences and shows around the world, people can't believe it. It is just so up itself, it's not true. Someone trying to be clever and it doesn't work. And THAT signature...whoa...scary or what?

By the way, before we go any further, let's face a few facts here. And I think some of you may not like them...

The recipients of your communication have *not* been waiting for it to arrive. They don't want it, if you can stand the truth. They don't really want to read it either. You're actually getting in the way of their day.

They are not the slightest bit interested in you, your brand or your products...

...just a little bit of a mountain to climb, then...

June 2005

**Romec**

Andy Owen & Associates Ltd  
1 Highfield Road  
Hall Green  
BIRMINGHAM  
B28 0EL

Dear Customer

**“Delivering Value Through Performance”**

Romec is a leading provider of integrated facilities management services. Working closely with customers, the company provides tailored solutions to match business needs.

Romec operates a fully equipped commercial mailing operation located within Birmingham Mail Centre. We offer a full range of mailing and photocopying facilities from single page letters to fully bound manuals inserted into DL, C5, C4, envelopes or poly-wrapped into clear plastic bags ready for immediate despatch.

We also provide a full range of Print including four colour process newsletters, directories, guides, posters, advertising materials as well as single and multi colour work, reports and business stationery, for a range of customers and businesses including the Royal Mail Group and Balfour Beatty.

Everything from estimating to production control is managed on the very latest Management Information System to ensure the most cost effective use of materials and resources to meet customer requirements. This is linked directly to the production area providing accurate and up to the minute information. The capture of such information allows accurate reporting of data to customers.

Please do not hesitate to contact me on 0121 380 4153 or at [mick.w.showell@romec.co.uk](mailto:mick.w.showell@romec.co.uk) for a quote on any of your print and mailing requirements or to explore how we could best fill a supplier position and add value to your organisation.

Kind regards



Mick Showell  
Mailroom Manager  
Print Solutions

Building Services Installation    Building Services Maintenance    Electronic Security    Alarm Receiving Centre    Fire Detection Services  
Materials Handling Equipment    Manufacturing    Cleaning Services    Office Management Services    Print Solutions

Romec Limited, Registered in England and Wales, Number 4235613. Registered office Highbank House, Exchange Street, Stockport SK3 0ET.

What I call a 'fancy themselves' letter. Nothing in the letter at all about what they might be able to do for me. Four out of the five paras talk about the company. Then they have the nerve to ask me to contact them. Why should I? You haven't given me anything to buy.

Headline is crap too...

So, how do you tackle the challenge of connecting and interesting the reader?

Well, a good start would be to avoid writing tosh like the examples above...

What do you have to do to ensure your important (to you) promotional message, is noticed, read and acted upon?

To start with, you've got to **think**. And do this before you write. The best writers are always those that think before they write.

If you adopt this approach by the way, you will be amongst the minority.

Most people write without thinking, or just think while they write.

That's why 99 out of every 100 letters you receive, have no impact on you whatsoever.

Work out your copy strategy. Base it on three words – benefit, benefit, benefit...and always look at it from the recipient's point of view, not from your or your company's...

But, don't stop after telling people about the benefits of your product or service. Tell them what they'll miss if they don't buy it..

Napoleon said, *"There are two motives to action - self-interest and fear."*

I'll add my own ten-penneth to that - *"people only buy for two reasons – good feelings and solutions to problems..."*

Incorporate the necessary key elements in your letter copy that relate to the above – and you'll see your response levels go up.

It's essential to get your copy out of the blocks quickly, with the reward-for-reading promise made in your benefit-laden headline and one that you probably teased on the outer envelope.

Which brings you to the massively important first paragraph.

(Massively important, yet almost universally misunderstood, by the way).

More about this later...



Mr A B Sample  
Sample Title  
Sample Company  
Sample Road  
Sample Street  
Sample Town  
Sample City  
Sampleshire  
ABI 1AB

November 2006

Dear Mr Sample

**A brand new, comprehensive 184 page book, covering  
all aspects of roofing - absolutely FREE...**

Let's face it. Roofing is a *specialist* area.

To keep yourself updated and aware on modern pitched roofing design is not easy.

Well, I have some very good news for you today...

The recent merger between Marley Roofing and Eternit has produced the largest provider of pitched roofing products in the UK today. And to celebrate this, we have produced a superb new book called *Pure Roofing*.

**This book contains all the information you could possibly need to design and specify pitched roofs - and we would like to send it you, with our compliments. Yes, this 184 page book - also incorporating a superb CD ROM - can be yours, ABSOLUTELY FREE!**

This unique book provides detailed information on what you need to consider when designing a pitched roof, including legislation, roof structure and weather resistance.

In addition, you will find a full range of Marley Eternit products for all applications and budgets, including:

**\*Clay plain tiles \*Eternit fibre cement slates \*Interlocking slates \*Concrete tiles \*Dry fix and ventilation systems...and much, much, more...**

And that's not all. Inside the book is a CD ROM, containing over 2,500 CAD drawings that can easily be incorporated into CAD packages.

To request this fantastic book couldn't be simpler. Just complete the personalised response form we have enclosed for your use and fax it back on 01675 468455, or post it to us using the Freepost envelope provided.

Alternatively, if it is more convenient, please call us on 01283 722588 or visit our website [www.marleyeternit.co.uk/purerroofing](http://www.marleyeternit.co.uk/purerroofing)

We look forward to hearing from you very soon.

With warm regards

Sarah Hanlon  
Product Manager

**P.S. Don't forget! This 184 page book also contains a CD ROM with over 2,500 CAD details and it's yours ABSOLUTELY FREE. So don't delay, contact us today and we'll send you this excellent book by return post.**

Registered & Head Office: Marley Eternit Limited, Station Road, Coleshill, Birmingham B46 1HP  
T: +44 (0)1675 468400 F: +44 (0)1675 468485

Registered No: 486100 England

an **Etex** GROUP company

This is a recent one of ours. I'm delighted to tell you it generated a 51% response rate. Why? Well, it oozed benefit, connected early and never let go. Plus, it contained that wonderful word FREE.

Don't be afraid of it. It works and will continue to do so until the world stops turning...

To get attention with your selling copy, you must:

Make the offer and benefit(s) so powerful, so unusual, so relevant or so dynamically dominating, that the reader is captured at once and has no option other than reading on.

I had an intriguing conversation recently with someone who actually responded to a hugely successful direct mail pack that we created not long ago, for Time Out London.

I asked him to share with us the sequence from the time the direct mail pack arrived through his door...

*"Well, the message on the outer envelope got my attention. Then, the headline of the letter offered me a stunning benefit and was relevant to me. So, It continued my interest. That interest carried me into the copy. The first paragraph continued to hold me and promised me even more. The second paragraph started to convince me...."*

*Then something very strange happened. The following minute or so seemed to move very quickly - and the next thing I knew, I was on the telephone ordering the product..."*

It's what we call, in the business, a result. But it also shows you what can - and regularly does - happen when a good professionally written letter with a strong and relevant offer, is put in front of a targeted individual.

What has happened here? Simple. Here's the recipient again...

*"The product was interesting to me. The offer was very attractive and the benefits to me were almost irresistible. So, at the end of the letter I was convinced that the product was good for me. So, I said to myself, I'm going to buy it **NOW**."*

What this also shows, of course, is another hugely important area. The immense control that knowledgeable copywriters can have on this whole process.

It's not a two way street, as some people may think. As Herschell Gordon Lewis said many years ago, *"A good copywriter is almost like a scientist conducting an experiment. The reader will be taken on a colourful and interesting journey, being influenced constantly whilst being tickled and tempted with incentives and experiencing good and positive feelings about the communication."*

With the sole objective, of course, that when the reader has completed that journey, he or she is sufficiently influenced to pick up the telephone, fill in the response device, take out a subscription, make a donation etc....

A good writer will take charge. Without the reader even knowing it.

In the above Time Out example - which is real by the way - the reader admitted he was basically controlled by the writer. The selling argument was delivered correctly and, without knowing it, he became putty in the hands of the professional...

To people who work with words, every one is a weapon. And every word is considered. And reconsidered. Maybe replaced. Then changed. And probably changed again.

Until we finalise the draft that, in our opinion, works as hard as it's possible to work and will get the job done...

Let's assume that I've teased you with my envelope copy (and graphics, perhaps) and you open the letter with interest. You will look at the headline delivering the benefit-laden offer to you and - SLAM! - it hits you right between the eyes...

You will then look at the P.S. (nearly 8 out of 10 people go to the P.S after they have read the headline) where you should see the offer repeated, with enthusiasm, together with any offer deadline. Then, you will enter the body copy at the first paragraph...

*At this point, most letters have seconds to live...*

And most don't make it. Here are the four main reasons why...

1. The sentences are too long
2. The connection between headline and opening para is not continued
3. The paragraph is unattractive and looks too daunting to read
4. The copy talks about the company or product and not about the relevance of the offer and benefit to the reader

There are others, of course. But these are the main 4 culprits and the reason why your waste bins at work and at home are overflowing with mailings that have died, almost before they've taken their first breath.

Or, put another way, been killed by a poor copywriter.

*Literate manslaughter* I call it...

Remember, we're in tough times. The recipient of your communication is apathetic and cynical and only looking for a way to get out of reading the copy.

Badly written copy is all the excuse that's needed.

The opening paragraph is, therefore, a killing field. So, how can we not only get across it, but also use it as a springboard to propel the reader into the rest of the copy?

Firstly, make the sentences short. No more than 8 words. 4 is good, 2 can be even better and ONE, on occasions, can be just the job...

Make it easy on the brain and easy on the eye.

And, ensure that the promise and interest that you have generated with your envelope copy and headline are maintained...

Don't go off on one. Don't ramble. And, for God's sake, don't try to be clever.

That's instant death. The reader is interested. Maintain and grow that interest. Remember, you only have 2.8 seconds.

Joe Sugarman is a legend in our business. Thanks to Murray Raphel, I recently made contact with him, which was a great honour and a delight for me. Joe now lives in Hawaii.

In his tremendous book "*Advertising Secrets Of The Written Word*" Joe reckoned that the copywriter's challenge could be put simply. The object of the first sentence is to get the reader to read the second. And so on...

*"If the purpose of all the elements in your communication is to get the recipient to read the copy, then what we are talking about is reading the first sentence. If the reader doesn't read your very first sentence, chances are that he or she won't read the second"*

This applies throughout the letter, or ad of course...

Which is why the proven link words and phrases, including *"That's not all ..."* *"What's more ..."* *"And"..."But..."*, are such powerful arrows in the copywriters quiver. When used at the start of a paragraph, they create a natural link from the previous one - and keep the copy flowing...

*(Yes, starting a sentence with 'And' is good. Never mind what your teacher's taught you, they had absolutely no idea about how to write copy that sells...!)*

In summary, here are a few tips that will do you no harm, in your search for that extra performance from your copy.

1. Think before you write
2. Benefit, benefit, benefit
3. Powerful offer in headline
4. **Strong opening paragraph**
5. **Short sentences**
6. Keep it flowing
7. Make it easy for people to respond

To finish, a little bit of a rant.

Good copywriters get very precious about their work.

All professionals do, of course. But, I can tell you that we deserve a lot more respect than we receive, sometimes.

An awful lot of thought has gone into the choice of words we use.

So, when a client decides to change something for 'cosmetic' reasons - *"When the letter was shown around the office, most of the people didn't like XXX, so can you change it to YYY" - that's when we get very unhappy...*

XXX was put in for a reason. YYY isn't as powerful.

Trust me. I've tested it...

I had a headline changed on a sales letter recently and the whole offer became half as attractive in one fell swoop.

No matter how hard I argued, they wouldn't budge.

It's absolutely crazy. Why have a dog and bark yourself...?

Answers on a postcard, please...



Anyway, rant over. Have a fantastic Christmas and New Year holiday -stay safe - and I hope to see you at one of my shows in 2007.

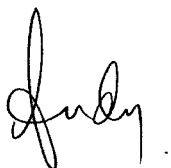
It looks like being my busiest year ever on the international conference and event circuit.

Already I have shows confirmed in Russia, South Africa, Ukraine, Slovenia, Middle East and India, plus IDM Roadshows in the UK and the usual IDMF and DM Live events at Earls Court.

You'll find the latest details at [www.andyowen.co.uk/andys-events.html](http://www.andyowen.co.uk/andys-events.html)

Please come up and say hello!

Keep the faith



### **About the Author**

Andy Owen is Managing Director of Andy Owen & Associates, a leading International Strategic Marketing Consultancy specialising in contemporary direct marketing.

The company provides advice, guidance and high quality expertise in all aspects of direct marketing to companies all around the world.

Head Office is in Birmingham UK. Other offices are in London and Dubai, with associate offices in Cairo, Paris, New York & Los Angeles.

The company's corporate website is [www.andyowen.co.uk](http://www.andyowen.co.uk). The specialist copy division has its own site at [www.copywritingthatsells.com](http://www.copywritingthatsells.com)

If anyone would like complete copies of any examples shown in these articles, please contact Andy direct at [andyowen@aol.com](mailto:andyowen@aol.com). or [copydeskUK@aol.com](mailto:copydeskUK@aol.com)

Andy can be contacted on 0044 121 778 6640, or by email personally at [andyowen@aol.com](mailto:andyowen@aol.com)