

Guide to writing copy

When it comes to marketing a show or exhibition, copy is one of the most important things. It tells your audience what to expect, and lures them in by describing the piece. It's crucial to get it right, so here are some tips. – Alexandra Coke, Marketing Manager

Getting started

Marketing copy is what your audience see first. In print or on a website, they look at the image, then the text – then they decide whether or not to see the show. It's a small piece of text which needs to do a big job.

Really good copy should sound like you're talking about the show in your own words. So often people seem to think that they need to use impressive language, but we just need to feel what you feel. If you can talk with passion and excitement about your show to a friend, you can write copy for it.

Start by writing down everything you can think of about the show: genre, story, unique features (puppetry, live music etc). If you have any creative partners, talk to them! Take notes while they are discussing the show, then use those notes, and your factual ones, to write your copy. This approach will help you end up with something honest and easy to read, which imparts how excited you are to present this piece to the world. You'd be surprised what good stuff can come out of speaking out loud.

Top tips:

- Try to write in the active voice: "James sat by himself" rather than "James was sitting by himself." It's more straightforward and interesting.
- Vary your sentence length.
- Use words which nobody has to look up in a dictionary to understand.
- Try to avoid clichés. Don't describe your show as *unique, magical, spellbinding, unmissable*, or anything else you would see in an advert.
- If you have press quotes about this show, or previous shows, put them in – they speak for the quality of the piece much more than you saying it's "unmissable." (I miss things all the time. Every show is missable. Don't tell me I shouldn't miss it – tell me *why I should go and see it.*)

Try to help your audience imagine what the show or exhibition is like. It's as simple as that.

Rules

Rule #1: Tell us what the show is about.

Many companies fall into the trap of using what marketers call "Fundingsese": language which sounds great in a funding application, but isn't always accessible to potential audiences. People want to know what your show is. Again, this comes back to writing as you would speak – if you wouldn't say "Their interaction with people extends their existence to a subjective object," why would you write it down?

Beware! It's so easy to come up with something which sounds really good when written down, but doesn't actually say anything about the piece. Once you've written it, show it to a non-art friend and ask them the Three Key Questions:

1) What is the show/exhibition about?

What is the story? Who are the characters, and what are they doing? What kind of art is it, and what story is it trying to tell? Where is it set?

2) Is there anything in this description that you don't understand?

What kind of words are being used? Ideally copy should have a reading age of 13 or under in order to be accessible to everyone. Do all the sentences make grammatical sense? Is it too vague, does it explain things clearly?

3) Does this make you want to come and see it?

Is it interesting? Exciting? Emotional? Does it tell you enough of the story to entice you?

Good:

"An award-winning comedy by Kill the Beast, *He Had Hairy Hands* is a 1970's detective werewolf mystery wrapped in a hilarious Hammer Horror. *An American Werewolf In London* meets *Twin Peaks*, *The Wicker Man* meets *Scooby Doo*, and *The League of Gentlemen* meets your fluffiest nightmare."

Let's ask a non-art friend:

- 1) We know what it's about: "1970's detective werewolf mystery" couldn't be much clearer.
- 2) The only thing you may not understand are the pop-culture film references – and if you don't know them, this may not be the show for you.
- 3) If you're a fan of those films, and the Hammer genre, it makes you want to see it.

Bad:

"Layla is tired. Mike is nervous. Jen just wants to go home. *Target* is about power, ownership and the modern world. Join three young people as they attempt to navigate the waters of technology, family and the ever-decreasing job market."

What do you think, non-art friend?

- 1) What's the actual story? What is it *about*? I can't tell from this.
- 2) What does "about power, ownership and the modern world" actually mean?
- 3) Um...no. I can't tell what I would actually be watching.

Rule #2: Keep it simple.

When you've spent the last few months or years creating something, it's really hard to step outside it and see it as others will. The visual art world is especially prone to using references and words which simply don't mean anything to people outside that bubble.

Theatre can be guilty of this too, using the aforementioned Fundingese to obscure the story of the play.

Good:

“Trio draws together engaging new works by the three winners of this year’s OVADA Professional Development Award. With the support of expert mentors and Arts at the Old Fire Station, the artists have crafted an exhibition that moves between media to encompass drawings, pen-and-ink work, and digitally engineered paintings.”

Hey, non-art friend.

- 1) I know who this exhibition is by, and which art forms it uses.
- 2) I understand everything they have said in this.
- 3) If you’re interested in work by new artists, it makes it sound interesting.

Bad:

“Inspired by the philosophical principles of the epistemological identity of words, Anna Johnson uses experimental drawing techniques to create ambiguous artwork in mixed media. She explores shades of light and dark, coming to conclusions about the way we use language as a social construct.”

Non-art friend! What do you reckon?

- 1) So the exhibition is about...language? Philosophy? What kind of art is it?
- 2) I don’t understand what any of those words mean. What is “ambiguous artwork in mixed media”? What is “mixed media”?
- 3) I really don’t want to see this. It sounds like I wouldn’t get it.

Rule #3: Make sure your copy reflects your show.

This is hugely important. If your play is performance art and you make it sound like a one-man show, you will attract an audience who may not enjoy it. If it’s sexually explicit and you don’t provide a warning, you will get complaints. If you make it sound like a comedy and it’s actually incredibly sad with a few funny moments, your audience will be suspicious of you next time. Make sure the tone of the copy matches the tone of the piece.

Rule #4: Never use exclamation marks.

A creative writing professor once told me that if your sentence needs an exclamation mark in order to work, it’s a weak sentence and you should re-write it. I completely agree, and encourage you to live by this teaching as well.

Some good examples of copy:**THEATRE***I AM BEAST (Sparkle & Dark):*

What happens when the wildest parts of our imagination take control? After the death of her mother, Ellie escapes to a flickering world of comic book superheroes and bewitching strangers. But as the walls of her new world begin to crumble, Ellie must finally face the truth behind her fantasies.

This is a succinct, accurate description of the plot, told in an emotional way. It doesn't give the whole story away, but it tells us enough to make us interested in hearing the rest.

Following on from the acclaimed success of Killing Roger, Sparkle and Dark return with I AM BEAST, an award-winning, visually stunning exploration of the power of grief and childish imagination, using UV landscapes, original live music and unique life-sized puppetry.

They mention their last show, which readers may have heard of. Then they clinch the deal by talking about the visual aspects of the production, which sound exciting and different.

COMEDY

Eat The Poor (Jonny & The Baptists)

Three quarters of MPs are millionaires. A third of the country lives below the poverty line. Whatever your politics, Jonny & the Baptists think it's worth talking about.

Comedy shows don't have plot, as such, so J&TB take the approach of talking about the issues they are going to cover.

A riotously funny epic about friendship, inequality and betrayal from the multi-award-nominated musical comedians.

Here they sum up the show in a few words, remind us that they have been nominated for many awards, and let us know that they offer musical comedy, as opposed to straight stand-up.

ART

Exhibition: Chop Marks (Miranda Cresswell)

Miranda Cresswell's drawings on used kitchen boards use the traces of 'chopmarks' which are left behind on them - as part of a half remembered, imagined landscape.

This is clear and concise. It tells you about the exhibition in words which are very easy to understand, and avoids incomprehensible phrases.

In the same way that chop marks on coins authenticate their value, the artist is giving value to the daily meals made using these boards and to the wooden material originating from the landscape.

Here she goes into more detail about the thinking behind the exhibition. It's really understandable to an audience who don't speak 'art-language'.

Presentation

Venues need at least two versions of the copy for each show – 50 words for the What's On guide, and 100/150 words for the website.

Always send a short and long version of your copy. This way, you get to choose what it says, instead of the venue marketer editing it down to 50 words themselves.

If someone from a venue asks to change your copy, have a conversation with them about what they want, and why they want to change it. They know their audience, and will have ideas for how to engage them.

Translation

So: imagine you are confronted with something you don't really understand. How do you translate it?

Art-speak:

Through a union of repetitive form, industrialized materials and a desire for the unadorned, [Exhibition] showcases a selection of new work by [Artist]. Painting, sculpture, and print techniques come together to form an installation that highlights the ways in which abstract references inform architectural structures.

I've highlighted here the phrases which I didn't get. In all honesty, I can't translate this because I don't know enough about art – so I'd suggest phoning up the artist and asking them to tell you, in their own words, what the show is.

Oh, you meant:

Architects are often inspired by abstract shapes and patterns. The buildings around us may seem dull, but look closer and you'll see a very different story. Using painting, sculpture and print, [Artist] helps us see the artistic features we've never noticed before, on buildings we see every day.

Why didn't you say so?

Fundingese:

From darkness, through sunrise to dawn light the performance unfolds around the audience, who are invited to wander, encounter and react to the production as it develops. Each person's experience will be unique and personal.

Film, dance and music interlace to create an immersive and mesmerising sunrise experience inspired by the Native American saying: 'Every Night is followed by Sunrise'.

This reads as if it's been lifted from a funding application. It's very nicely written, but funding applications and marketing copy need to do different jobs. It describes a lot of the features of the show, but doesn't tell us much about what to actually expect.

How about:

Film, dance and original music combine to bring a sunrise into the theatre. Share the stage with the dancers as they create an immersive and touching performance around you. Inspired by the Native American saying, "every night is followed by sunrise", [Show Name] explores the human fascination with the dawn.