CREATE A REALISTIC TIMELINE

CHEAT SHEET

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Scoping & Briefing Stage

This is the first meeting to discuss the project. Initial questions answered on timescale availability and scope of project. This is often done on the phone or email, but for larger scale, kick off projects a meeting should be set up. Remember if your copywriter has to travel to check whether they charge out for travel time. It may be more prudent to do a telephone call or Skype.

- o   Mini/Simple Projects – 1 -2 hours

- o   Average/Complex – 2-3 hours

- o   Large Scale Projects – 3-5 hours

Often time is required to 'live' with the brief and address any further questions that come up, or get answers on points that could not be clarified in the first meeting.

At this stage if the conversation is too general, the Copywriter should take control of their briefing document to focus the discussion. The **generic briefing document** only takes an hour or two to complete fully.

Research notes/read through materials/research

Before any work can be done, no matter how simple the project, the Copywriter needs to understand everything about the client. Their industry, the market they operate in, their place in the market. Who are they talking to? What do they care about? Getting under the hood of the client's requirements is crucial to producing good copy with the minimum number of drafts (typically 3).

- o   Simple Projects – 2-3 hours

- o   Average/Complex – 3-6 hours

- o   Large Scale Projects – 6-10 hours

So you can see, even before any writing commences, the preparation for any given project can take anything from **4 hours – 2 days**. Time-sensitive projects often squeeze the briefing and research stage with clients believing that simple projects are 'easy'. However, important aspects of the message could be overlooked completely and, in so doing, the copywriter would fail the whole 'targeted communications' test. No doubt you'll end up having to go back to the drawing board to start all over again if these stages are missed out completely.

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Hierarch of Messaging/Key Messaging & Value Propositions

This is one of the most misunderstood elements of a copywriter's role. More often than not a client will advise on a hierarchy of messaging which simply alludes to the type of 'content' they would like to include. That's not messaging in the true sense and is not all that helpful to copywriters because it's the copywriter's job to figure out the weight of content – based on the Hierarchy.

Hierarchy of Messaging

- o Simple Projects (local companies/small projects) – ½ day - 1 day

- o Average/Complex (SMEs) – 1-2 days

- o Large Scale Projects (launch campaigns/global brands) – Minimum 3-5 days

Key messages as they relate to each audience

- o Simple Projects (local companies/small projects) – ½ day - 1 day

- o Average/Complex (SMEs) – 1-2 days

- o Large Scale Projects (launch campaigns/global brands) – Minimum 3-5 days

Value Propositions – what makes the product/solution attractive to the audience?

- o Simple Projects (local companies/small projects) – ½ day - 1 day

- o Average/Complex (SMEs) – 1-2 days

- o Large Scale Projects (launch campaigns/global brands) – Minimum 3-5 days

Review & sign-off on Messaging

Messaging so important as it provides the structure for your copy. With this in mind, sign-off is necessary – make sure EVERYONE agrees the most important things to be communicated. If you have had a chance to think about the copy, it may also be useful to highlight the key points you plan to cover in your copy. It's actually a great saving tactic – it may seem more work to the client up front, but will actually save time on written content and miscommunications later down the track.

Where possible budget some time for this round of feedback before you get started on the first draft.

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First Draft

Naturally it depends on the scale of the project. If you are working across a range of deliverables for a product launch and have a Go-to-Market date, then you may need to be running a number of projects side-by-side. Knowing the resource requirements up front is CRUCIAL to good planning, good copy within realistic deadlines.

Mini Projects: 1 day

While mini projects, such as 400 word blogs, may only take a couple of hours to write, you will still need to factor in **Keywords/SEO/Metadata** expertise as well as research time if it's a new topic. There are many unseen factors that can influence time on these supposedly mini/easy projects so I always advise quoting ½ day **minimum** for blogs – and a full day if you are involved in sourcing images/upload/quality control/sharing to social media at the end of the process.

Simple Project: 2 days

May include words to *support** a design project – i.e. where words that are not required to persuade/motivate/educate/engage an audience in a lead generation/conversion context. Little research required/ mainstream industry.

Sample projects:
- o 4pp-8pp brochure
- o Radio or TV scripts
- o Posters
- o Event Flyers

Average/Complex Project: 3-5 days

May include small or ad-hoc projects which are required to persuade/motivate/educate/engage (SEO/Metadata etc). Extensive research required/niche/specialist industry.

- o 8pp-20pp brochure
- o 800-1600 words magazine/newspaper editorial
- o 1-6 screens of website content

Large Scale: 5 days +

- o Multimedia scripts/campaigns
- o More than 2 pieces of collateral
- o 6+ screens of web content

Please Note: **At Draft stage a copywriter is not concerned with proofing and editing.** This is the phase of the project where everything from the brief is committed to paper. Ideas and concepts take form and generally the draft will put everything on the table to consider. It's worth remembering many clients don't actually know what they want until they see it written down – it's easier at this stage for them to see what they definitely don't want. This is valuable in itself. So ensure your clients understand the purpose of the first draft.

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First Draft Review

When you send your First Draft out for review, only send it to the key stakeholders identified for the project. It is not helpful to invite comment from Uncle Tom Cobley and all. Each of the stakeholders will generally have an area of expertise so it's best to ask them to stick to review the draft as it relates to their area.

It's very important to provide Reviewers with direction on what type of feedback you require from them (answer questions for further clarity etc) and also give a specific deadline to get feedback returned to you. Always allow a day or two where possible but no longer than 1 -2 weeks for larger more wieldy projects.

- o   Simple Projects – ½ day - 1 day

- o   Average/Complex (SMEs) – 1-2 days

- o   Large Scale Projects (launch campaigns/global brands) – 1 -2 weeks (Maximum)

Second Draft

This is the time where you try to marry up and make sense of everyone's comments. If you are very lucky the majority of your review team will agree on changes/nature of feedback. If not, (i.e. You are dealing with a highly political organisation or two people who see things differently) – then my advice is to ensure you're working within a transparent process. All members of the review team need to work together to provide unified feedback, so ensure everyone is always copied in the various emails until decisions are made about what to keep and what to drop.

HOWEVER - and this is a big however, don't allow clients to just to slash and burn content, left right and centre. The copywriter's role is to make sure the content stays ON MESSAGE (remember our hierarchy?). The hierarchy dictates THE most important messages, that should never be cut from the draft. This hierarchy also helps client to remember the purpose of the communication. It is the copywriter's role to say – this must stay. Ask your client 'In what way does this support the message?'

As you can imagine, the second draft can take a bit of time to co-ordinate, but again you should keep sensible time limits. Ideally, (depending on scale of project):
- o   Mini Project: 1 day
- o   Small Project: 1-2 days
- o   Average/Complex Projects: 3-5 days
- o   Large Projects – 5+ or as appropriate

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Second Draft Review

At this stage there should be no major surprises from either side. If the scope of a brief changes significantly then the timeline will have to be revised accordingly.

At this stage it should be a case of mid to low level feedback. Again, it's very important to provide Reviewers with direction on what type of feedback you require from them at this stage and also give a specific deadline to get feedback returned to you.

Always allow a day or two where possible but no longer than 1 -2 weeks for larger more wieldy projects. A good way to approach clients or stakeholders who are repeatedly late with their feedback is to say you will be progressing to the next stage by a certain date, and if you have not heard from them, you will assume that they are happy. This is important in terms of a paper trail and accountability. Alternatively, if their feedback is absolutely crucial, make sure all stakeholders are aware that the deadline can only be met if everyone pays attention to what's required from them. Copywriters live by their deadlines and flag slipping dates as soon as there is an issue.

- o Simple Projects – ½ day - 1 day

- o Average/Complex (SMEs) – 1-2 days

- o Large Scale Projects (launch campaigns/global brands) – 1 -2 weeks (Maximum)

Editing –the third draft

Now you have factored in all the feedback. Your stakeholders are onboard and everyone is in agreement. You may have a few tweaks here and there but basically your copy is fairly solid. Happy Days.

Now is the time to edit and proofread – the Quality Control stage of the process.

Now it may surprise non-writers just how long editing and proofing can take. You're not just scanning to make sure the content makes sense. You have to read each and every word – each and every line. Properly. There is so much more to editing and proofing than first meets the eye, which is why it is important to factor in enough time to do it properly. Because there are any number of items to check, it's useful to focus on one specific area for each read through.

For example, your first read through may be to check phone numbers. This may involve calling them to check that they actually work. Or perhaps checking addresses/contact details in general – the correct spelling of names and so on. The next read through may be to check Links to website/email addresses etc. Do you have all the metadata? Keywords in the copy and headlines? All the points highlighted in a company Style Guide are proofed/reviewed at this point. Are you using gender-neutral language throughout? Are you using British or American English throughout? Is it appropriate for your audience? Have you checked all the page numbers? And so on …

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You may move some paragraphs around if you are doing a structural edit, but you are not changing content – just making it tight.

This phase may also involve a certain amount of formatting – either within your Word document or within a designer's layout. Sometimes when a designer moves copy into the layout things get lost or misunderstood. Your role is to spot these little glitches (even if you feel you have read your content a million times already – it's entered a new critical phase where other elements have come into the mix – along with an increased margin of error).

Finally, you are ready to proofread – Yay!

This stage of the process should NEVER be overlooked or squeezed because this is the face of the client's business. If there are simple mistakes in the copy this is going to reflect badly. It's important the client understands the necessity of a good proof read – at the end of the process. If you have the luxury of working in an organisation that has a copywriting team, then there should be 2 rounds of proofreading before the final document is produced.

All in all – you should allow some time for a comprehensive edit and proofread:

- o Simple Projects – ½ day - 1 day

- o Average/Complex (SMEs) – 1-2 days

- o Large Scale Projects (launch campaigns/global brands) – 1 -2 weeks as appropriate

PHEW … YOU MADE IT

So now you and your client have a much clearer understand of how a copywriter gets from A-C. Of course these timescales are not prescriptive in any way, but they do serve as flags to show what is missing – and what's at stake - if you squeeze timelines beyond all usefulness.