

# Magazine Advertising Copy

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Many successful advertisements capture a reader's attention by deliberately contradicting expectations. This convention of nonconformity rewards creativity and exploration, but discourages strict regulations. The genre of promoting ideas or products changes constantly, as innovative ads continually replace yesterday's stale traditions. This evolution is what complicates our job of defining precise strategies for writing successful ads.

Popular magazines commonly feature full-page color ads. These often depict modern culture, relate to current events, and reflect the mindset of the period. Magazine ads do more than just sell products; they also promote ideas, bolster public opinion of a brand name, and are fun to look at. To break away from the mainstream, advertisers employ new ideas and constantly challenge current trends. These imaginative ads draw attention and revenue, and promote the culture of freedom and unrestrained creativity that exists in the advertising industry today.

We know that the unstructured freedom of writing the text in a magazine ad (called the copy) can be overwhelming for the unaccustomed. We wrote this guide to help you understand what works and what doesn't. It describes common techniques and explains when to use (or ignore) them. Hopefully, this discussion will prompt you to ask productive questions about your own work, and will help you create successful ads. It will also give you valuable instructions on how to market directly to your ideal consumer by giving you a comprehensive understanding of how the genre functions in society.

## THE GOALS OF ADVERTISING

Magazine advertisements often appear simple, but are actually very complex. Although the copy is almost always short, the layout is perfectly designed to maximize its effect. The interplay of words and images on the page attracts and maintains a reader's attention, communicates a message, and convinces a reader to do something he wouldn't otherwise do. Ads can direct readers to visit websites, buy products, form opinions, or think positively about an advertiser.

Successful advertising copy is difficult to write because it must appeal to your ideal reader's attention in less than 4 seconds, the time that most readers' eyes spend on a given magazine page. In those four seconds, seven out of 10 people will read the headline of an ad, three out of 10 will continue reading, and fewer still will buy the advertised product, says advertising expert Murray Raphael.

## BEFORE WRITING

Before composing advertising copy, writers decide on a goal and develop a strategy for achieving it. They define a copy platform, which is a few paragraphs describing what the copy will say, and how. A copy platform should specify the ad's medium, message, and ideal market, as well as its tone, mood, voice, and length. It should also explain why these decisions help achieve the advertiser's goal.

The following two sections discuss visual and textual rhetorical strategies commonly used in ad writing. In addition to describing the wording of an ad, we decided to explain the use of visuals and layouts because copy cannot be separated from its surroundings. It only makes sense in its context.

Below, the 'Standard Text' section gives guidelines for writing typical ad copy, and the 'Variation Text' section describes effective ways to implement creative techniques. The guidelines we give are suggestions, not rules, and we encourage you to purposefully explore other methods as well. Have fun!

## STANDARD TEXT

Conventional ads are effective because they appear familiar and trustworthy to the reader. Readers already know what to expect from the ad, so they can easily identify its purpose and message. Conventional ads are likely to draw some reader response, but are usually not the most successful ad in a magazine. They are a safe option for the writer because they are known to be effective.

To create standard ads, you must understand and follow the customary techniques of the style. This section will provide you with the main concepts you'll need to understand before you write, and also an explanation of how to use the elements in the ad to your advantage.

## CONCEPTS

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We wanted to understand *how* successful ads communicate with their audience. So, we chose ads that caught *our* eye, analyzed the qualities they shared, and identified the following seven techniques.

### **Know the medium and the style.**

Study other magazine ads to familiarize yourself with this style of advertising. Ads in business magazines should be professional, while ads in adventure magazines should be fun and inspirational. Magazine ads that are well-fitted will interact constructively with the other ads and articles in the magazine.

### **Talk to your audience, not at them (Don't preach).**

Write as if you're addressing one person instead of a mass of people. Use the words 'you' and 'your' and the indicative (command) forms of verbs to make your writing more direct, while avoiding a bossy tone. For example, 'Call Now!' sounds pushy, while the phrase, 'When you

want to order, just give us a call,' does not. Give your message a more personal tone, and you will draw a better response from your readers.

**Know your audience and what they want.**

Magazines discuss a specific subject, so it is possible for you to target advertisements to the group of people who will read them. If you design your ad to match the mood and tone of the magazine where it will appear, you will be able to establish a stronger connection with your readers.

**Make an emotional appeal and support it with logic.**

Readers respond to advertisements using their emotions, not their logic. An emotional appeal will give your readers a stronger desire to buy. Use pictures and words to generate this response.

**Appeal to the reader's self interest, not yours.**

Concentrate on your reader's needs, and stress how your product or service will benefit them. The faster the reader sees the potential benefits and feels the need to own the product, the faster they will decide to buy.

**Simplify everything**

Readers spend only four seconds on each magazine page, so your ad must capture their attention in this short time. Don't bog down readers with long sentences and complicated structure. Instead, use short and simple phrases with one- and two-syllable words. This will help maintain their focus.

**Arouse curiosity**

The longer a reader sees your ad, the more information they will absorb. One way to keep readers interested in your ad is to arouse their curiosity. To keep them reading past the first few seconds, make them want to know more about your product.

**FORMAT**

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Magazine ads generally have the following elements: a creative image, a large headline, and a section of text with small font for details. These elements work together to attract and maintain a reader's attention, and instruct them to act. Although ads show great variety, they actually follow a standardized format.

**MESSAGE**

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An ad must convey the meaning that 'you [the reader] will be happier if you buy our product.' Surface structure that explicitly says this would ruin the ad's credibility. However, strategic rhetorical appeals in each of the parts can convey an accurate deep meaning to a specific audience.

Advertising only works when it communicates its intended message to its clients. When you write, keep in mind the ideal reader that you defined in your copy platform. Continue to revise and edit your copy until its message is clear and directed to that person.

Your message must also help you achieve the original goal you defined in your copy platform. The wording of your ad will depend on whether you want to sell a product, promote an idea, or bring attention to your brand name. As you write, frequently ask yourself if your writing helps you reach your goal.

## HEADLINE COPY

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Headlines are the part of the ad that first draws a reader's attention. They are exciting, related to the visuals, and they create a curiosity that encourages the reader to continue reading. Headline copy is short, catchy, and powerful. Sentences are in the active voice, utilize descriptive and imperative verbs, and are directed towards 'you', a reader as an individual, not as a demographic.

## VISUALS

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The purpose of a visual is to create an emotional appeal by conveying a message without words. Visuals are usually large and related to the headline. Together, they create a strong curiosity to read further text in the ad. They often show a reader how they can benefit from a product by portraying young, attractive, happy people using the product. This creates a desire to buy.

## BODY COPY

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Body copy is what really sells a product. It directs the reader to act, contains the product details, and stresses how the product will benefit the customer. This text uses emotional and logical appeal to create a desire for the product. Sometimes, *body copy purposefully* uses imperfect grammar, but can still be easily understood; it commonly imitates spoken word, so that the wording has a more intimate feel to the reader. Like the headline, sentences usually contain the word 'you', use active voice, exciting verbs in imperative form, and colloquial vocabulary. This simulates personal communication between a company and its customer.

## DICTION

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Good ads use clear writing that is appropriately directed to your intended audience. They eliminate distracting errors and confusing words. They also require *appropriate* spelling, grammar and punctuation, and avoid obscure words, complicated sentences, redundancies and overwriting. Following these conventions may seem elementary, but will make your writing clearer and easier to understand.

Successful writers use plain English, a style of writing that ensures clear, accurate communication. Professor Robert Eagleson of Australia describes it as "language that avoids

obscurity, inflated vocabulary and convoluted sentence construction...Writers of plain English let their audience concentrate on the message instead of being distracted by complicated language."

## LAYOUT

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The layout of an ad unites the elements, strengthens the message, and makes the ad visually appealing. Ads generally have a vertical layout, are printed in color, and include aligned elements with empty space between them. Many ads are multiple pages, and some even fold out of the magazine. Commonly, headlines are below the top of the page by 1/3 or 1/5 of the page width, and the company information (name, contacts, slogan, logo) is above the bottom of the page by 1/5 of the page width. Between the headline and the company information is a large visual and a short section of body copy. The visual usually connects all the elements.

## EXAMPLES

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### Example 1:

#### Chase Your Dream

When you were a little kid, what did you want to become?  
Baseball Player? Ballerina? Or Teacher?

Engineers and designers of Lexus put a great amount of  
time and effort into their ultimate machines.

*Here, their dreams come true.*



#### *Message*

The main purpose of this ad is to reinforce the Lexus brand image. Although ads commonly introduce specific models, others (like this one) can create positive opinions about a company.

#### *Headline Copy:*

The headline of this ad, 'Chase Your Dream,' inspires the reader and creates a curiosity to read further. Although this headline does not talk specifically about the car, it effectively encourages the reader to look at the rest of the ad.

#### *Visuals and Layout:*

The picture of a Lexus provides a strong image of the car as well as of the Lexus brand. This layout was well-planned because the headline is large at the top of the page with a small paragraph below. The oversized picture makes the reader want to own a luxury car.

Example 2:



**Get high.**

This winter, kick your moves into high gear! While you soar, spin, and grind in Washington's largest terrain park, personal freestyle instructors will amp up your park session. By mid-season, you'll be rockin' added altitude, extra rotations, and a more thrilling aerial experience. Defy gravity: [www.huskywintersports.com](http://www.huskywintersports.com).

**Husky Winter Sports**  
huskyw@uwashington.edu (206) 543-8032

**Message:**

This ad is aimed at male college students who already enjoy skiing or snowboarding and want to learn tricks in the terrain park. It's simple and clean, with a fair amount of text that interested viewers can choose to read.

**Headline Copy:**

The bright orange headline is the focal point of this otherwise black-and-white ad; warm colors draw attention to themselves. The words say, 'Get high,' and the headline itself is placed high on the page.

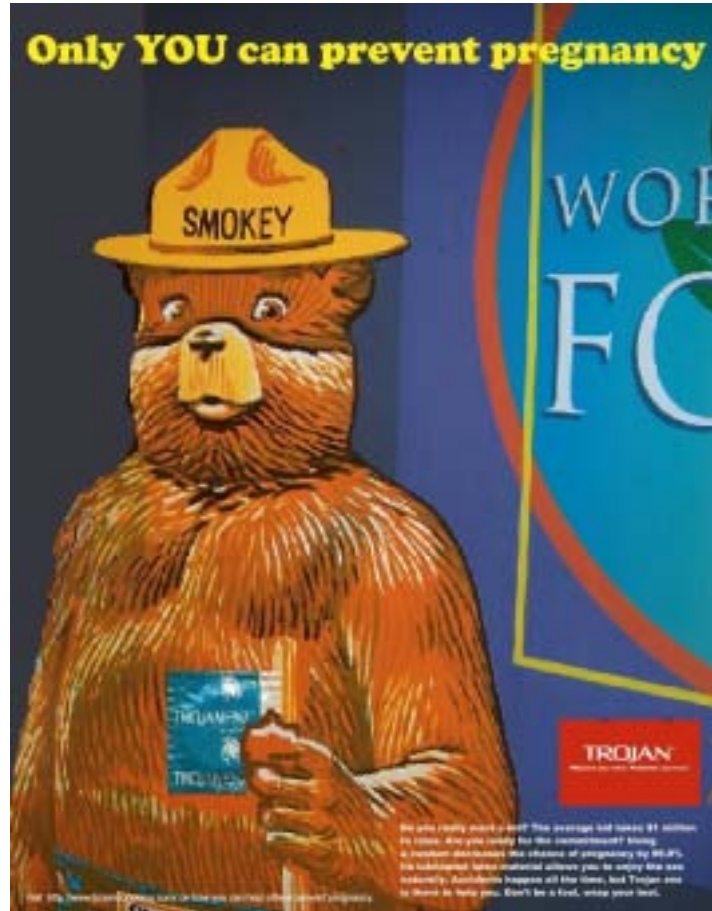
**Visuals and Layout:**

This layout is designed to help readers associate 'fun' and 'cool' with 'Husky Winter Sports', which is printed in large type at the bottom of the page. The oversized image of the jumping skier allows for this connection, both visually and conceptually. The skier's pole and skis point to these two elements, allowing the eye to connect them.

**Body Copy:**

To make this ad 'cool' to snowboarders (who tend to care about their appearance), action words like 'kick,' 'soar' and 'spin' are included with common snowboard terminology like 'park session' and 'freestyle', while avoiding 'uncool' terms like: lesson, school, learn, and beginner. This diction choice, along with plentiful uses of 'you' and 'your', familiarizes the ad for the intended audience and maintains its readability for others.

Example 3:



**Message:**

This ad is aimed at men with an active sex life. It's purpose is to encourage the use of condoms to prevent pregnancy and promote the Trojan-enz brand at the same time.

**Headline Copy:**

The headline of this ad is connected with the original message of Smokey the Bear: "Only you can prevent forest fires." The humor intended in this copy appeals to readers who regard condoms as an embarrassing item. By bringing humor into an ad, it increases the chances of readers remembering the ad.

**Visuals and Layout:**

The image of Smokey the Bear is in connection to the headline copy. If either the headline or the image is missing, readers will not be able to understand the ad. The focal point of this ad is Smokey the Bear and the condom he holds in his hand.

**Body Copy:**

Because this ad's purpose is to advocate the use of condoms, the body copy included facts about the consequences of unprotected sex. This combined with the benefits of using a condom work together to strike the point into the reader's mind.



## VARIATION TEXTS:

In the previous three examples, we explained how to compose a 'typical' text. Alternative ads change the purpose, context, or conventions and can generate innovative and attractive new approaches to advertising. These variation ads are more risky to publish because their unusual structure can be confusing to readers. However, when they are well done, they are exciting to read, can bring wild success, and can inspire entirely new trends in advertising.

This section is meant to inspire you to break the standard 'rules' of advertising, as long as you can identify *why* breaking them makes your writing more effective.

## EXAMPLES

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### Example 1:

*There Is No Need for Other Adjectives.*

#### *Message:*

This ad is for car magazines instead of general magazines. It specifically targets car lovers, who are very familiar with the advertised car and other cars on the market. By providing detailed information, readers are automatically informed how this car is better than the current model and its competitors', and why people should purchase it.

#### *Headline Copy:*

The headline copy of this ad is "There Is No Need for Other Adjective. This Is Just ELEGANT." The word 'ELEGANT' fits very well with the image of Lexus and reinforces readers' positive feelings toward Lexus, which will effectively interact with the three pictures.

#### *Visuals/Layout:*

The three pictures on the ad are related to its features next to them, and they are arranged in a zigzag format so that readers do not lose their attention and can easily follow what each picture is about.

#### *Body copy:*

Very detailed information, such as new technology and specific features of this car is provided, even though it is usually excluded. This is because the target audience is those who read car magazine frequently and should be interested in them.

#### *This Is Just ELEGANT.*




*"Feel Powerful but Still Economy"*  
The all new **Lexus LS** has an eight speed unit that is coupled to a new 380 horsepower 4.6 liter V8 engine. This ultimate machine goes from zero to sixty in less than 5.5 seconds. Even with all this power, fuel economy is expected to be better than the current model.

*"Feel Luxury First Class"*  
The long wheelbase model is 203 inches long and has a special luxury package available for the rear seats that includes a right rear seat that not only reclines, but has an "ottoman" that extends out to serve as a footrest. This rear seat also has an extensive massage system that allows you to control the type and intensity of the massage. The system also includes a DVD entertainment package and a hidden cooler compartment.



*"Feel the Highest Technology Ever"*  
Up front, the driver has a navigation system that also includes real-time traffic reporting. The system indicates which roads have congested traffic by changing the color of the road on the map screen. Another feature is the Intelligent Park Assist system that would allow the car to actually park itself. The available Mark Levinson® audio system now has Surround Sound with 19 speakers and a hard-disk audio server built in to hold 4,000 of your favorite songs

Now, are you satisfied? Learn more at [lexus.com](http://lexus.com) 

**Example 2:**

**Message:**

The purpose of this Husky Winter Sports (HWS) ad is different from the standard one above – it attracts new instructors instead of students. Since HWS hires instructors selectively while students come from very diverse backgrounds, the ad for instructors must be very specific. This ad appeals to candidates who have appropriate experience, interests, and commitment.

**Headline copy:**

The headline copy is very straightforward, but still serves a purpose. It reads, “Wanted: Snowboard Instructors.” Though simple, this headline can actively alter a reader’s thought by encouraging him to identify with the ad.

**Visuals/Layout:**

To emphasize the fact that HWS is seeking people in exchange for compensation, this ad is designed as a ‘man wanted’ poster, reminiscent of the ones used for old-time outlaws. This format includes a large heading telling what HWS wants, and clear sections at the bottom detailing ‘Description’, ‘Reward’, and contact information.

**Body copy:**

The ‘Description’ and ‘Reward’ sections rely on logos and pathos to make their claim. An offer for a free season pass appeals to a reader’s pathos, and also his logic. He can see the monetary benefits to a free pass, as well as the fun ones.

**::WANTED::**  
**SNOWBOARD INSTRUCTORS**

**::DESCRIPTION::**

- UW STUDENT OR EMPLOYEE
- INSATIABLE DESIRE TO RIDE
- UNDYING LOVE FOR FRESH SNOW
- GNARLY GOOGLE TAN IN SPRING
- TEACHING EXPERIENCE OPTIONAL

**::REWARD::**

- UNLIMITED SEASON PASS
- FREE SLOPESIDE CABIN
- PSIA CERTIFICATION
- RIDE EVERY WEEKEND
- YOUR BEST WINTER EVER!

**::REPORT ALL LEADS TO::**  
HUSKY WINTER SPORTS :: UW SKI & SNOWBOARD SCHOOL  
HUSKYWINTERSPORTS.COM :: HUSKYWS@U.WASHINGTON.EDU

**Example 3:**

**Message:**

Many reading materials today lack surprise – everything seems too rational. The writer of this ad attempts to increase the amount of surprise in the reader’s life. Using strategic absences of rational material in a magazine ad, the writer has created a variation that, at first glance, make no sense. Only after reading the body content will the reader understand the message.



For safety’s sake, look before you cross.

**Headline Copy:**

With the message “For safety’s sake, look before you cross” and the images of the results of a deer and car collision, this ad seems to target a deer audience. However, the purpose of this ad is not to advise deer on how to cross roads, but to incur curiosity and confusion in readers.



Each year, thousands of deer and cars collide, we all have loved ones whose been victims of these unnecessary collisions. Don't be a statistic and help this world be a better place. Look both ways before crossing and teach your kids to play away from freeways.

**Visuals/Layout:**

There are three pictures provided in this ad. They are used for attracting readers’ attention and creating curiosity to read the headline and body copy under the picture of the deer.

**CONCLUSION**

Now, you have the tools to know what makes an effective ad. Do your own research by flipping through magazines and cutting out ads that catch your eye. Study the techniques that make that ad so effective. Also find less effective ads, and identify exactly how their flaws can be improved.

We’ve provided guidelines that describe what has been useful in the past, but creating effective advertising depends on imagination, innovation, and fresh ideas.

This guide is meant to be an overview of magazine advertising. When approaching a project, be sure to do further research to identify necessary information specific to that style.