

CLASSIC COPYWRITING FORMULAS

**31 TRIED & TESTED BLUEPRINTS
FOR RADIO SCRIPTS**

4th Edition
2024



EARL PILKINGTON

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31 Classic Copywriting Formulas
By Earl Pilkington

1st Edition 2015 “20 Copywriting Formulas”

2nd Edition 2017 “25 Copywriting Formulas”

3rd Edition 2022 “31 Classic Copywriting Formulas”

4th Edition 2024

FORWARD FROM THE FIRST EDITION (2015):

Over the past 25 plus years of working in newspaper, television, radio, and web, I have often noted how similar a lot of the advertising was.

This sent me on a quest to discover if what I was seeing, and hearing was some type of secret formula's being used to write all types of advertising.

What follows is the notes I gleamed from going back through 30 years of scripts, magazines, print ads, and the past 10 years of 'good' web advertising.

I have left out of these formulas the truly tragic and bad, and focused on the good, for these I know work. They intrigue me, pique my interest, and make me want to find out more, buy a service, and want a product.

All these formulae could be applied to any variation of a medium, even twitter, web copy, radio, and print advertising, direct mail, TV, cinema ads and even billboards.

FORWARD UPDATE (2nd Edition - 2017):

This edition has now grown to 25 formulae.

I am amazed that people are still asking me for copies and updates to this document (thanks mainly to the forum members of RadioDaddy.com).

UPDATED FORWARD (3rd Edition - 2022):

This edition has corrected some issues with attribution and cleaned up some very messy spelling mistakes and grammatical errors. It has also grown again to 31 Copywriting Formulas. (The 2022 edition became part of the Radio Copywriters volumes of e-books.)

UPDATED FORWARD (4th Edition - 2024):

Tidied up a couple of mistakes and added the back cover which went missing?

Earl Pilkington.

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1. THE 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 FORMULAE FOR PERSUASIVE COPY

- 1. What I've got for you?**
- 2. What it's going to do for you?**
- 3. Who am I?**
- 4. What you need to do next?**

This basic four-question formula builds the foundations for most of the formulas you will find here, from simple storytelling to inspiring twists.

After telling the story and explaining the benefits, you then get to sell the client on your authority.

Who are you and why should someone listen to you?

Explain that part well enough, and you can breeze to the call-to-action in the final step.

Example:

"Need tickets to tonight's concert? Impress your friends with front row seats, listen to <STATION NAME> for your chance to win!"

"Seclusion, privacy, and an oasis in your busy world. You'll be more relaxed, and so will your family. Call <BUSINESS NAME> to see this incredible home, by appointment only."

"Raise the bar and raise your standards at <BUSINESS NAME> Bar and Bistro. Book your table now for our 'Wednesday Night Family Friendly Comedy Night'. Call <PHONE NUMBER>"

"Planning to get away these holidays? When was the last time you checked your tires and brakes? Call <BUSINESS NAME> and book in for your free, no obligation inspection and report. Make the holiday getaway a safe one."

2. THE 3 REASONS WHY

- 1. Why are you the best?**
- 2. Why should I believe you?**
- 3. Why should I buy right now?**

This trio of ideas is an expansion on a tried-and-true question that all copywriters strive to answer: “Why?”

Why should I buy from you at all when I understand your competition better than you do, and there’s no difference?

Example:

“Our H.R. staff have a 98% placement rate that astounds the industry! And those we place, are still working! Contact us now to find your next job”

“We’ve won best agency in the country... again! That’s 5 years running! We must be doing something right, but we have to prove it, to YOU!”

3. THE 4 C'S

- 1. Clear**
- 2. Concise**
- 3. Compelling**
- 4. Credible**

Stay focused on the goals and the benefits to your audience.

Keep your writing clear, keep it concise, find a compelling angle to write from, and write with credibility that what you're promising can be trusted to happen.

Example:

"Guys! Remember everything. Even your wedding anniversary. The world's most well-known memory tool is now here."

"Clean glass... means you can see the kids playing... you can watch what they are doing in the backyard... with... the dog! HEY! STOP THAT!"

4. THE 4 U'S

- 1. Useful – Be useful to your audience.**
- 2. Urgent – Provide a sense of urgency.**
- 3. Unique – Convey the idea that the main benefit is somehow unique.**
- 4. Ultra-specific – Be ultra-specific with all the above.**

From headlines that grab attention in direct mail to long copy on the web.

The 4 U's formula has elements of urgency and specificity and is useful for radio scripts or writing copy on social media.

Example:

“This Saturday meet Small Business Grants Specialist Dave Gray and he’ll answer all your questions on getting money, for nothing... from the government. Starting at 9 am. But... there’s only 5 seats left.”

“Purchased clothing online and they don’t fit? Don’t leave them in the cupboard, going out of style, dig them out and bring them to Zippy Alterations... They do only 10 alterations a day, so first in, is best dressed!”

5. THE 5 BASIC OBJECTIONS

- 1. I don't have enough time.**
- 2. I don't have enough money.**
- 3. It won't work for me.**
- 4. I don't believe you.**
- 5. I don't need it.**

Chances are that anyone can easily come up with reasons not to read, listen or watch.

Those reasons will likely fall into one of these five basic objections.

Keep these in mind as you're writing. If you can solve all of them, wonderful.

AND... If you can solve even one, awesome!

Example:

"How are you going to spend the next 5 minutes you have free at home? Relaxing or working?"

"Think you can't afford that new house? Think again, unlock the value in your current home..."

6. THE 6+1 MODEL

- 1. Context**
 - 2. Attention**
 - 3. Desire**
 - 4. The Gap**
 - 5. Solution**
 - 6. Call to action**
- +1. Credibility**

Danny Iny of Smashing Magazine's formula has the first six items in this copywriting formula follow a similar path to the Before-After-Bridge formula, giving your audience a sense of what life might be like with your product/service/idea.

The key element that Danny has added: **CREDIBILITY**.

You can do all the above and you'll be well on your way to a sale, but you still won't get it without one more ingredient, added along the way.

That ingredient is credibility.

Example:

"The tools that master craftsmen like James Fagin use, can now be yours, along with 100 of his favourite easy projects..."

"Used as a backdrop for a 2016 Scoop Magazine cover and article, this property is now famous, for all the right reasons. It can now be yours, see the exclusive selling agent..."

7. AWARENESS – COMPREHENSION – CONVICTION – ACTION (ACCA)

Awareness – Present the situation or problem.

Comprehension – Help your reader understand how it affects them. Explain that you have the solution.

Conviction – Create a desire and conviction in your reader to use your solution.

Action – Call to action

Another variation from other formulas, you might want to sample this one for its focus on comprehension.

Whereas other formulas describe the situation and tell stories... this one formula acts more as a diagnosis: This is what's happening, and this is how it affects you.

When done right, the comprehension step should lead straight to conviction then action.

Example:

“How does your neighbour make their place look so good? The team from Jacks Garden Care are at his place right now. Join up at Jacks now. We only service a limited number of customers to keep our quality this good”

“In what way do you keep up with the latest news? Feel out of the tech loop? Don't know the latest score? Get the latest news YOU want delivered to your phone, now! Our app is available...”

8. A F-O-R-E-S-T

A – Alliteration

F – Facts

O – Opinions

R – Repetition

E – Examples

S – Statistics

T – Threes (Repeat something three times to make it memorable.)

Phew! This is a big one.

And is extremely useful for long copy ads, or websites where you can give drawn out details and lots of every one of these points.

Example:

“Luxurious lakefront. Warm wood floors. King-Sized Kitchen... for details see”

“Wild weekends, Fast Fords, Mustang Memories... from 1964 to this year’s models...”

9. A-I-C-P-B-S-A-W-N

Attention – Biggest benefit, biggest problem you can solve.

USP Interest – Reason why they should be interested in what you have to say

Credibility – Reason why they should believe you

Prove – Prove what you are claiming is true

Benefits – List them all (use bullets)

Scarcity – Create scarcity

Action – Tell them precisely what to do

Warn – What will happen if they don't act

Now – Motivate them to act now

I'm not sure this one was meant to be an acronym or not. It's long!

So how do we break that down?

A unique selling proposition is the big idea and finding the unique angle to pitch your product/service/idea is key.

Like the A F.O.R.E.S.T. formula, you can grab bits and pieces of this one when required.

Example:

“Join our mailing list at Bob's Shave and A Haircut dot com and you'll discover products and insights that we don't share anywhere else, not even in the shop!”

“Dave's been working here for 25 years; he knows more about garden sheds that you would ever want to know. But he also has more ideas than we can count about how to make your shed work for you, not against you. Ask to speak to Dave when your next in, and, if he's free... you'll be in the know too!”

10. ATTENTION – INTEREST – DESIRE – ACTION (AIDA)

Attention – Get the reader’s attention

Interest – Interesting and fresh information that appeals to the reader

Desire – Benefits of your product/service/idea and proof that it does what you say

Action – Ask for a response

AIDA is the standard copywriting formula for almost every type of marketing copy.

It’s been used for direct mail, television and radio, sales pages, landing pages, and so much more.

Many other formulas will play off the elements included here.

My favorite part of AIDA: *Attention!*

Example:

“Get a sneak peek of this weekend’s Big Music Festival. If you want to see big name acts, before your friends do, call now to be at the sound-check...”

“Wrinkled? Wonderful? Will society ever accept ‘old’ as beautiful? Join the beauty debate at...”

11. THE APPROACH FORMULA

Arrive at the problem.

Propose a solution.

Persuade the listener that your solution will work.

Reassure that you and your solution can be trusted.

Orchestrate an opportune opportunity to sell.

Ask for the order (or response).

You might recognize parts of this formula if you've ever had a call from a telemarketer or a visit from a door-to-door salesman.

It's called the soft sell.

The formula takes its time to get around to the "ASK" part, building trust along the way and looking for the best time to make the final step toward the sale.

Example:

"We've had lots of very helpful and insightful comments on our Facebook page from our customers. Why not try some out and leave your thoughts too..."

"Oil leak in your driveway? Was it your car? A quick 5-minute fix suggested by a customer of ours now saves hundreds of others time and money!"

12. BEFORE – AFTER – BRIDGE

Before – Here's your world...

After – Imagine what it'd be like, having 'Problem A' solved...

Bridge – Here's how to get there.

Describe a problem, describe a world where that problem doesn't exist, then explain how to get there.

It's a super simple setup, and it works...

Example:

"Creating and maintaining a website takes time. Imagine cutting weeks of work into just 15 minutes a day... Here's how to do it"

"Bored? Boring! Begin to plan your time better and escape the rat race before you know it. Find out more at..."

13. BOB STONE'S GEM

Begin with your strongest benefit.

Expand on the most important benefit.

Tell exactly and in detail what they are going to get, including all the features and benefits.

Back up your statements with support copy.

Tell them what they'll lose if they don't act.

Sum up the most important benefits.

Make your call to action.

Tell them to "reply now" and give a good, logical reason why they should.

Steve Slaunwhite shared this useful formula in his book *The Everything Guide to Writing Copy*.

You could probably have guessed that the originator of this formula is Bob Stone.

The successful ad man came up with this formula for sales letters and direct response ads, but it's been used in several different ways since.

Example:

"Share awesome content on your Twitter and Facebook feeds, when your customers want it, even if you're not around! It's all about scheduling..."

"Learn the basics of copywriting that can and will boost your business in less than 3 months. From newbies to established business writers we've got over 30 tips to improve your website and advertising from someone with real world experience, not theory! Scan the code below and discover..."

14. FEATURES – ADVANTAGES – BENEFITS (FAB)

Features – What you or your product can do?

Advantages – Why this is helpful?

Benefits – What it means for the person reading!

Focus on benefits, not features.

Take this advice to heart and avoid using the word “features” in any copy you write!

E.G.: You get this... and the product does this... so that you get this....

Examples:

“Complete management and scheduling of down time of your printer at work can save you time and money... Call...”

“A bigger holiday, better car, and no debts... Makes you happier, healthier and more secure... The right investments make all the difference”

15. THE FAN DANCER

Be specific without explaining anything.

It took me a bit to wrap my head around this one.

What is a “fan dancer”? Well, it’s nothing really.

But it did pique my interest! And that’s the point.

The Fan Dancer formula uses specific details to create curiosity, all the while never revealing any actual information about what that tantalizing something is.

Example:

“Have you heard of the 2-Pizza Rule? Or the 4 Pasta Pact? This work lunch concept will inspire”

“There’s three clever ways to turn a vacation into a business tax deduction even if you don’t own a business... see ABC Accountants today to find out how”

16. FANTASY (OR WHAT THE?)

Fantasy or Concept copy used in advertising are the inspiration for this formula.

They have nothing to do whatsoever with the product and usually leave people thinking 'what the?' or 'what was that all about?'

With high end production values, many Super Bowl commercials can fall into this formulas category, and usually these ads are designed by agencies who are looking to win awards and gain press coverage, rather than winning customers.

But the big thing is... that these fantasy commercials do connect with customers using emotion to hook people in and get them talking about the product or service.

Examples:

"Santa's Elves aren't making toys at this time of year... instead... they're baking cookies. Deliciously warm and full of treats... but who are they for?"

"It's a quiet night in the woods. The moon slips behind a cloud. The earth shudders. A small mound of dirt pushes it's self-up. It gets larger and larger, and reaching up and out from the depths below... it's... The brand-new gardening shop on..."

17. LITERARY DEVICES

Many of these styles and types of writing are likely done subconsciously.

It's kind of neat to know there's a name and history behind them though.

Here are my five favourites:

Polysyndeton — Using Extra Conjunctions

"If there be cords *or* knives *or* poison *or* fire *or* suffocating streams, I'll not endure it"

– Shakespeare, *Othello*

Chiasmus — Reversal of Structure

"Mankind must put an end to war or war will put an end to mankind."

– John F. Kennedy

Epizeuxis — Simple Repetition of Words and Phrases

"Never give in — never, never, never, never, in nothing great or small, large or petty, never give in except to convictions of honour and good sense."

– Winston Churchill

Anaphora — Repetition at the Beginning

"Mad world! Mad kings! Mad composition!"

– William Shakespeare, *King John*

Epistrophe — Repetition at the End

"What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny compared to what lies within us."

– Ralph Waldo Emerson

18. THE OATH FORMULA

The four stages of your audience's awareness of your product/service/idea.

Oblivious

Apathetic

Thinking

Hurting

This formula can help guide your copy because it helps you focus on the reader and his or her needs.

What stage are they at in their awareness of your product?

The spectrum runs from the completely unaware ("oblivious") to those in desperate need of a solution ("hurting").

Knowing where your audience stands can help determine how you frame your writing.

Example:

"Have you heard? Don't work out in short spurts... take your time and your results will be incredible... these tips and more from the personal trainers at..."

"If you haven't seen these... you don't know what you are missing! Fashionable jewellery that will turn heads on any occasion"

19. OPEN LOOPS... THE PSYCHOLOGICAL PULL OF NOT KNOWING

- 1. Create a cliffhanger with your content**
- 2. Open loops are rooted in psychology.**

We need closure in our lives, and when we don't get this closure, we feel anxiety, which spurs us to get closure, to find out more, to *keep reading*.

Open loops are mostly used in Hollywood filmmaking and TV.

In TV shows are the equivalent of that cliffhanger that keeps you up at night, consuming your mind with thinking about what's going to happen the next week, or that story line that was never quite explained.

Those aren't accidents, they are put there so that it's harder for people to get up off the couch than it is to stay and watch "just one more episode."

Example:

"We lost our biggest client, and it led to our biggest ever month in sales? Find out at our free, no obligation open night..."

"Dave's new, used car was... let's face it... past it. But now he's driving a brand new, new car to work every-day... until..."

20. PARODY

Parody itself is not a formula but using parodies in repetition becomes formulaic and therefore it works.

For example, your business characters you use in your commercials who constantly parody the latest movies.

Another example is headlines for blog posts which mirror popular books, films, or songs.

Examples:

“There are ‘50 Ways to Leave a Lather’ and other sappy soapy hits are available right now at the Soap Shack”

“Clintstones, meet the Clintstone’s they’re the modern bronze age family... Well-Ma! Why aren’t my babies’ booties bronzed yet?”

21. PROBLEM – AGITATE – SOLVE

PROBLEM - Identify it.

AGITATE - that problem.

SOLVE - the problem.

You're looking at one of the most popular copywriting formulas out there.

It's ever-present in copywriting lists and tips books and guides.

Compared to number 12 on my list **B-A-B (Before – After - Bridge)**, it's nearly an identical match with only one difference: Instead of describing a life without the problem (the "After" part), PAS describes life if the problem were to persist (the "Agitate" part).

Examples:

"Staring at a blank page... you can let writers block win, or you can fight back... Read the..."

"Is your home falling apart? You could spend your time fixing it... or..."

22. PICTURE – PROMISE – PROVE – PUSH (PPPP)

Picture – Paint a picture that gets attention and creates desire.

Promise – Describe how your product/service/idea will deliver.

Prove – Provide support for your promise.

Push – Ask your audience to commit.

Many of these formulas involve showing someone a picture of a desirable outcome.

What a great opportunity to deliver happiness to potential readers and customers!

The PPPP follows up this dream with specific ways that the product/service/idea can help, along with proof that it does.

The final step—call to action—is crucial to this formula’s success.

Example:

“No more late-night ice cream runs. Get your groceries delivered to your door, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week! Call...”

“The latest blockbuster, the tastiest popcorn, all in the comfort of your own home, how? Netflix!”

23. THE READER'S DIGEST BLUEPRINT

John Caples... a famous copywriter says that you can take great inspiration from studying the way that *Reader's Digest* articles are composed, so true!

They are fact packed.

They are telegraphic.

They are specific.

There are few adjectives.

They arouse curiosity.

Remember that your opening sentence should be short — even as short as one word.

Remember that the wrong quote can repel readers.

A great story begins in the chaotic middle of the action.

And... this formula is mostly used for click-bait advertising for a reason.

Example:

"53% of your customers have never shared their experience on social media. Learn how they spend their time online..."

"7 extraordinary tales of business survival, their solutions will astound you..."

24. SONIA SIMONE'S 5 PIECES EVERY GREAT MARKETING STORY NEEDS

You need a hero.

You need a goal.

You need conflict.

You need a mentor.

You need a moral.

Copy-Blogger co-founder Sonia Simone's formula has "Conflict Fits" with Problem-Agitate-Solve.

But the "Mentor" stage fits with the new-world vision of Before-After-Bridge.

All five elements together make for great storytelling—for a blogpost, a landing page, radio script, and many more spots that support a start-to-end story.

Example:

"This quick-thinking veteran saved a room full of kids from a teen with a knife... you could too..."

"Meet the woman who throws birthday parties for homeless kids at..."

25. SO WHAT?

Every time you state something, ask yourself, **“So what?”**

Why should someone care about this thing I’ve written?

Typically, it will all come back to benefits.

Example:

“Our knives have the sharpest blades! So, you can chop ingredients quickly and efficiently, just like the pros!”

“Talk to anyone in any circumstance; network and grow your business with our 5 easy to learn tips”

26. STAR – CHAIN – HOOK

Star – Your product/service/idea

Chain – A series of facts, sources, benefits, and reasons

Hook – The call to action

The key element of this formula is the chain.

It is intended to take a reader from interested too attentive.

The right facts, sources, benefits, and reasons can help get them there.

Example:

“No more emails, no more to-do list. Free time on your hands. How do the ‘best in business’ get things done?”

“Hair, check. Make-up, done. Dress, sorted. Now... the shoes? Oh no!”

27. STAR – STORY – SOLUTION

Star – The main character of your story.

Story – The story itself.

Solution – An explanation of how the star wins in the end.

This formula doesn't necessarily need to be linear.

You might tell your story and introduce your star at the same time.

And the star can be anything—your product/service/idea or even the reader.

Example:

“We’ll service your vehicle, at work today, so you can take off early on Friday!”

“Weight and fitness goals... you can chip away at them by yourself, or over-achieve your goals with our help...”

28. THE STRING OF PEARLS

String together a series of persuasive stories.

What can this formula do for you?

Well... in one word... **LISTS!**

Lists have their roots in this copywriting formula.

If listicles don't fit your marketing strategy, you can go in a different direction by stringing together testimonials or benefits or any stand-alone elements that, when combined, make for an overwhelmingly persuasive pitch.

Examples:

"We've bought back 17 of the best products from this year's toy expo. See them before they hit the shelves at our exclusive after hour's event"

"1. Shauna's getting married. 2. Dave's planning an office event. 3. Paul's kids are having a birthday party. Who do they all see? Their local Wedding, Event and Party Hire professionals, your first stop for all your one stop shopping."

29. THE U-P-W-O-R-D-S FORMULA

Universal

Picture

Words

Or

Relatable

Descriptive

Sentences

This is a neat one from Michel Fortin. He's found that using common words that conjure imagery or examples in the minds of readers will help a marketing message have meaning.

Example:

"Have your staff's training wheels gotten stuck in the mud? Start pedaling today with the help of our training services..."

"Our birthday balloon is still getting bigger and bigger, who knows when it will pop? Be there today when it happens, and you'll win with..."

30. V-A-K-O-G

Visual (sight)

Auditory (sound)

Kinesthetic (feeling or emotions)

Olfactory (smell)

Gustatory (taste)

Using all the human sensory systems can trigger a particular type of memory, which is split into the five different categories.

Thus, reinforcing the product, service, or story you are telling.

Using one or two of the senses helps to sell but getting the balance of all 5 is pure genius!

Example:

“Your hand touches the cold glass, you can hear them playing in the backyard, they’re safe and having fun in the warm sun. A small ‘ding’ interrupts your thoughts and the smell wafting from your new kitchen makes your mouth water...”

“The clock ticking echoes around the room. Its past midnight and you can’t get to sleep. The bed is uncomfortable, your partner is snoring, and... now there’s a mosquito buzzing around the room...”

31. WRITE TO ONE PERSON

“Good advertising is written from one person to another.”

The above is a quote from Fairfax Cone, one of the leading voices in copywriting.

His tip reads more like advice than a formula, but the takeaway is just as good.

Who is your ideal reader?

Find out, then write to them and them alone.

Example:

“Is your business socially minded? Don’t know what that is? See our website and discover a world of good deeds you can do today”

“Too busy to do your gardens this weekend. Get your weekend back, we’ll do them today, just the way you want it done!”

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