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Introduction

Thank you for downloading this book. Because you're reading this, I assume you're either new to content marketing, or you've written marketing pieces that didn't meet your—or your client's—goals.

Many companies today are getting on board with content marketing and getting rid of traditional methods that don't work anymore. Modern marketing plans probably include a lot of content writing. Your goal as a writer is to create and distribute relevant and valuable content to engage your target audience.

No matter what product or service a company sells, that company has a story to tell. You want to get the people in the niche you're writing for to care about that story. Once they do, they'll be more likely to move from mere readers and potential customers to buyers.

But how do you get that story across to your audience? Readers are both fickle and busy, and you have to grab them with your content right away. A piece that doesn't interest your audience won't meet a company's marketing goals.

Why does this happen? Let's talk about some of the problems that can make your content writing fall flat.

If you're writing internal communications, content needs to get employees behind the company's vision or clearly inform them of company happenings. If you're writing external communications, the most interesting point about your company or product has to be obvious, or your readers won't take their precious time to look for it. In either case, if the piece isn't well written, edited and designed, your reader will be confused and bored.

Thinking like a journalist will help you produce interesting and engaging content. Journalism and content marketing have a lot of parallels. Journalists write stories to inform and entertain an audience—whether it's for general media or a niche magazine. They know how to find the “hook” that lures readers into a piece, and connect with an audience quickly. Journalists also know how to humanize a story and center it on the people who make it come to life.

When you think like a journalist, you spend less time just throwing content out there and hoping it works, and more time really connecting with readers and potential customers.

It takes a lot of time and energy to produce a written piece. This guide will help you be more confident that your time and energy are wisely invested in producing pieces that count. By the time you finish reading this guide, you'll be able to do more than just reach readers in your audience. You'll create content that they'll enjoy reading.

Without further ado, let's get to the 15 journalism secrets that will help you write better content and meet your writing goals!

Secret One:

Decide the purpose of your marketing piece

Writing that doesn't have a purpose meanders around, not really knowing what it's doing. And it doesn't connect with anybody, because it either tries to connect with everybody or it doesn't know who it's trying to connect with. Don't do that to your readers, especially if you're writing for a company that wants them to become customers.

Most content marketing is likely to have one of two purposes. The questions you need to ask are: Is the purpose of this piece to bring in new customers or market to existing customers? Or both?

The answers to these questions will change the angle and tone of the piece. It will also change the terminology you use.

Current customers already know the company and products. You might need to remind them of who the company is and what it does, but you don't need to introduce the company and products from scratch. Maybe you're writing about an exclusive offer, or first shot at a new product. Your marketing piece doesn't need to include nearly as much background and explanation as a piece targeting new customers would.

New customers don't know much about the company yet. They've probably heard of it, found the website, or followed it on Twitter. But if the company sells something new or complex, readers will need more background about the company and product. A simple informative piece about a topic relevant to the industry—with some information about the company and products—would be ideal to start connecting with this reader. They may need more persuading before getting into the sales phase.

Once you've determined the purpose of your marketing piece and your audience, you'll be able to reach readers by paying attention to them, and by using the right vocabulary. Find the appropriate words for the type of piece you're writing and for the audience. If you're writing for new customers, treat them like a general audience, and use general words and explain any technical terms or products. If you're writing for existing customers, you still need to make your explanations clear, but you can treat them more like insiders and use specific words.

The questions you need to ask are: Is the purpose of this piece to bring in new customers or market to existing customers? Or both?

Secret Two:

Decide what type of piece best suits the story you want to tell

Written pieces might come to mind first for content marketing, and there are a lot of types of written pieces you could do. But don't forget about the power of podcasts, videos or infographics to get your message across.

To make your decision, think about the medium that will best tell the story. If you're discussing a complex topic or writing a persuasive article, a text-based piece will work best. If you're interviewing a subject matter expert, consider turning that into a podcast and posting it on the company blog so customers can hear it. Are you describing a process or showing a product? Think about producing a short video to show off the visual impact.

If you've decided on a written piece, you then need to choose what type of piece will serve your purpose. A written piece works best for topics that may be too complex for another medium. Text gives you space and depth, and it still carries an impression of intellectual quality. You can give details and context, and text on the Web is fast and cheap to post.

Podcasts and other audio stories are also easy to produce. Digital recorders are small, and editing software is simple. If you need to give your sources or experts a voice—literally—audio is ideal. Your audience can hear their words, tones, and inflections. They can also listen while they're doing other things or are on the go.

Video adds the visual impact. It takes a little more work to shoot and edit, but it doesn't have to be very complex to impress your audience. If your story is better told with sound and pictures, video could be worth the investment.

Secret Three:

Make your marketing pieces clear and concise

No matter what type of piece you're producing, make sure it's easy for your audience to understand. If it leaves them saying, "Huh? What did I just read?" then it may not be clear enough. If it's not clear, potential customers will lose interest in your piece, and possibly the company you're writing for.

Understand what your audience knows, and use words at their level. Readers won't go get a dictionary to look up words they don't know; they'll move on and read something else. Be specific, and give details. Don't assume the reader knows what you know without explaining it.

Tell the reader what the piece is about and what they will learn as quickly as possible. Write efficiently, using the fewest words to present the information accurately and clearly. Write simply, using words like ease instead of facilitate, many instead of numerous, and use instead of utilize.

If you're a company insider, jargon, clichés, and bureaucratese can easily creep into your writing. These words and phrases confuse the reader and interfere with your message.

Jargon is the specialized and technical language a company uses, and every company has it. You might understand the jargon, but remember that you need avoid it if you can, and explain it to your audience if you absolutely must use it.

Readers won't go get a dictionary to look up words they don't know; they'll move on and read something else.

Cliches are overused words, phrases and clauses. Some business clichés that get used often are: at the end of the day, out of the park, and think outside the box. If you've heard or read it somewhere else, come up with something more original and descriptive.

Bureaucratese is fluffed up, unnecessary or imprecise phrasing. It's usually used when people want to make themselves or their writing sound more important. Words like attritioned mark a bureaucratic writer. Fired works just as well and is more precise.

Secret Four:

Have one main idea per marketing piece

Each piece, whether it's a feature story or a case study or whatever, starts with a broad idea, which gets narrowed down until it's condensed into something doable. You should be able to answer this question in a single sentence: "What is this piece about?"

Answering what the piece is about will help you convey to the reader the one thing they'll learn from reading it. If you can't answer that question yourself, you're not going to be able to answer it for the reader.

If you find that there's more than one main idea, spin it off into more than one piece. You can take one broad idea, then narrow it down into one focus for a case study, another focus for a white paper, and another focus for a series of blog posts.

To figure out your main idea, start asking the same questions journalists use:

- Who is involved in the story?
- Who do I need to talk to?
- What is the one thing around which the story is centered?

Secret Five:

Use an outline to decide what's relevant to the main idea

The outline is a tool that organizes your information to make it easier to write your story. As you're researching your information and deciding on the main idea for your piece, an outline will help you decide your focus, and what is and isn't within your focus.

An outline forces you to think about your topic and get to know it more thoroughly. It clarifies the relationships between ideas, giving the story coherence.

An outline can be as formal or informal as you want to make it. It doesn't always have to have Roman numerals and letters underneath each other, perfectly indented like you learned in school. On a more complicated piece, a more detailed outline will help, but on simple pieces, a list of subheads or categories is enough to organize your main points.

The outline gives you more confidence as you sit down to write your piece. You don't have to think about what main point is coming next because it's in the outline. You're free to concentrate on the writing—the words and mechanics of spelling, punctuation, and sentence structure.

Secret Six:

Give information first; sell second

A successful writer always keeps the audience in mind first. Your audience wants information for some purpose, and they often know the type of information they're seeking. Your first job is to give them that information, before you attempt to sell anything to them.

To judge what will help your reader understand the information you're writing, ask: "If I were the reader, what would I want to know next? Have I told the reader everything I would want to know?"

Answer all of the questions that could be expected by your audience. This doesn't mean you have to answer every question that could possibly be asked, but those that it takes to understand the information. This keeps you in the mindset of always thinking about who will be reading this and what they need to know.

If you give them good information and get them to care about your company and its story, the sales will come naturally.

Content marketing is similar to media writing because you're writing for a mass audience. A lot of people will read, hear or see what you write. At least, you hope so. Media writing puts the writer in the background and emphasizes the content. The audience wants information, not your thoughts and feelings.

This doesn't mean that you always have to be objective, or that you can't be personal. It means that your first focus is on giving information to the reader. If you give them good information and get them to care about the company and its story, the sales will come naturally.

Secret Seven:

Accuracy and credibility matter

Accuracy is the chief requirement of any writer, not just a journalist. All writers are expected to present information accurately and get the facts right. Many of the processes in mass media writing are set up to ensure accuracy. You can apply these to content marketing.

First, you have to know the subject. You must understand what you're writing about, or readers won't understand it. If you don't know the subject, do enough research and check enough sources to gather reliable data. Even if you only have to go as far as the R&D department to get accurate information, make sure you know enough background to write a factual piece.

Journalists are also willing to investigate and be observant, and you can do this, too. Interviewing people who can confirm facts and add quotes is a great way to add credibility to a piece.

Verification is the process of making sure information is correct, and it's at the core of journalism. It is what has allowed journalism to be more believable than many other forms of writing. Verification should also be at the core of any factual content marketing piece.

You want to build credibility. Journalists and news organizations try to build it because they want readers and viewers to believe what they say. Credibility takes time to build—and unfortunately is easy to destroy—but if you do your best to be accurate and transparent about where you got your information, you'll build your own credibility, and that of the company you're writing for.

If you make an error in a piece, your audience will figure it out. But we're all human, and we all make mistakes. A credible writer and a credible company try their best not to make errors in the first place. If they do make them, they admit and correct them.

Most journalists make integrity part of their daily lives. If you and your company are committed to operating with integrity, you'll build a reputation for accuracy and credibility.

Secret Eight:

Humanize your content so people relate to it

One of the backbones of journalistic stories is human interest. Journalists write about topics and people that other people will be interested in. For successful content marketing, your pieces need to be not just about the company and its products and services, but about the people behind the company.

Tell stories that are about people. Every company is made up of people who each have a story. Products and services were created by people. They are also marketed to and affect people. Find one person or a few people and center the product's story around them. You'll humanize your content and capture your audience's interest.

Customers don't relate to faceless companies anymore—if they ever did. Today, most people buy products or services upon a friend's advice or online reviews. Tell stories like a friend, and you'll be on your way to humanizing your content.

Secret Nine:

Master the art of the interview to get people's stories

An interview is simply a controlled conversation with another person. Interviews don't have to be scary, and they can yield valuable information and quotes. A successful interview requires good preparation, good questions, and a confident approach.

If you're talking to a subject matter expert, think about what they can tell your audience. Research the topic and person before you go into the interview so you're familiar with their background, occupation, and accomplishments.

Start with a list of prepared questions, but leave some latitude for spontaneous questions. It helps to organize questions about the same topic together, and to start with easier questions, then move to the more difficult or technical ones.

A journalist's best interview secret is the last question you should conclude with: "Before I leave, is there anything else I should ask you about?" If you end every interview with it, it gives the interviewee a chance to open up new topics.

A successful interview requires good preparation, good questions, and a confident approach.

You can do interviews in-person, via phone or video chat, or via email. Use the method that works best for your interviewee. Some people would rather talk than write, and so would be more comfortable with a face-to-face or phone interview. Some people can't find the room in their schedule for a meeting, so an email interview would work best.

You get better, more natural answers when you talk to the person, so try to do face-to-face interviews when possible. Email answers will be stiffer because they'll sound like they were written instead of spontaneous. But if email is all you can do, it's better than nothing. An advantage to an email interview is that it's self-documenting. You can work from the email as you write the piece, or send it to someone else.

Use a tape recorder for in-person interviews, especially if it's going to be a while between the interview and when you write the piece. If you've conducted the interview internally, and you've hired a freelance writer to do the writing, use a tape recorder so you can send them the audio files.

At the very least, take detailed notes. Complete the notes as quickly as you can after you finish the meeting or phone call. Your memory starts to degrade almost immediately, and the faster you can fill in missing holes, the more accurate your notes will be.

Secret Ten:

Have a hook for your marketing piece

You have only a few sentences to catch and keep your reader's attention. Lead your piece with something strong to lure your reader in. If you don't start off interesting, your reader will get bored. And they'll move on.

A lead can be a few sentences or a few paragraphs, depending on the length and complexity of your piece. You can reveal everything the piece is about at the beginning, or you can tease the reader to keep their interest. Give them enough information so they know what they're going to learn, then give the main idea and move into the body of the piece.

There are several great ways to start your piece:

1. You can use dramatic stories or mini-dramas to set the stage and draw readers into the piece.
2. Ask a question. This entices readers because they want to know the answer. Use this lead with caution, though: Don't ask too many questions, and be sure you provide the answer quickly.
3. Create a setting. The same techniques a fiction story uses to carry the reader to a different time or place can also work in non-fiction marketing pieces.

Secret Eleven:

Conclude your piece well

Just as you need to start your piece off strong, you need to have a strong ending as well. A weak ending will leave your readers unsatisfied. You're asking them to spend time reading your piece. If they've gotten all the way to the end, leave them feeling good about the time and attention they've spent.

As you're thinking about your main idea, lead and outline, think about your conclusion. What will end the piece well and satisfy the reader? Making sure all of the questions about the topic are answered is a big step toward a good ending.

There are four good ways to end a story:

1. Circular organization. This is a common technique of unifying the piece by bringing the reader back around to the lead. You might answer a question that was raised earlier or complete a description.
2. Describe current action. Tell the reader what's now being done about the topic. This leaves the reader with a sense of where this topic or issue is now.
3. Describe future action. Answer the question: Where is this issue or topic headed next? End with a few sentences or paragraph about the future.
4. Give the reader an action. Ask the audience what they propose to do about the topic or issue. Or give them a call to action, something you want them to do.

Secret Twelve:

You're in a niche, but you're still writing for a mass audience

This secret and the next both sound paradoxical on the surface, but not if you think about them.

Products and services are marketed to a niche, which companies define by age, gender, income, interest, pain point, and a number of other factors. And the company may have built a profile of their "one person," the ideal customer.

A company's niche has to be narrow enough to define its business and customer base, yet be broad enough to have enough customers to sell to. So there are thousands of people—or more—in any given niche. This is how you're writing for a niche, but you have a mass audience at the same time.

It's similar to a local newspaper or radio station in a small town. The niche concept could be applied to only the people of that town who care about the news that happens there. But in order to have enough subscribers and listeners—and enough advertisers—to be successful, the newspaper or radio station needs to appeal to the majority of people in that town.

In the same way, your writing for your content marketing pieces needs to appeal to the largest number of people in a niche to be effective. Make your language and jargon broad enough, yet narrow enough, to match.

Secret Thirteen:

“Mass” media is really one-on-one media

This secret is the other side of the previous one. Media professionals learn this principle in journalism school, and it applies to anyone who writes for an audience.

Although you're writing for many people at once, your piece will be read by one person at a time. The powerful secret journalists learn is to talk to that one person. One way to do this is to pretend you're writing to a friend.

Think about it: When you read something online, do you read with a group? Not typically. When you listen to the radio or a podcast in your car, you're probably alone. If someone else is in the car with you, chances are the radio is turned down or off, and you're talking. If you're watching the news on TV, you may be alone, or your family might be in the room with you. But you're either all watching it intently, or it becomes background noise if you're talking over it.

Although you're writing for many people at once, your piece will be read by one person at a time. The powerful secret journalists learn is to talk to that one person.

When you truly concentrate on and consume media, you do it alone. The reader who downloads your content will be doing the same. If you talk to that one person with your content writing, it will have a personal touch that makes your reader feel involved.

Secret Fourteen:

Use a consistent content marketing style

Any company you work with should develop a corporate style for consistency between pieces. If you already have a company style, that's great. If you don't have a company style, you can easily develop one.

Journalists use Associated Press (AP) Style. American Psychological Association (APA) or Modern Language Association (MLA) Style and Chicago Style are used by college students, for academic journals, and for theses and dissertations. These style systems tell you whether you should spell out numbers or use numerals, abbreviate state names or spell them out, and how to cite sources.

Well-trained writers use style conventions to communicate stories to readers or viewers. Using a style system shows consistency, precision, and professionalism. For example, the company's name should be spelled and capitalized the same way, no matter where it appears. The names of products and any industry terms also need to be consistent. And every writer who works on a company's content marketing should know and follow the company's style.

If a company you work with doesn't have a stylebook, an entirely new style system as detailed as the AP Stylebook isn't necessary to be effective. A 20- to 30-page PDF will do. Here are some questions to think about for your company's style:

- What overall tone and level of formality do you want? How does it match the company's overall brand?
- How much jargon should writers use? Are there alternatives to jargonistic terms?
- Do you use contractions? Or second person?
- Do you use the serial comma? That is, the comma before the next-to-last item in a series. (AP Style does not use the serial comma, but APA Style does. Writers from different style systems need to know whether to put it in or leave it out.)
- When are numbers spelled out, and when are numerals used? Many style systems spell out single-digit numbers, then use numerals for 10 and above.
- How do you treat quotation marks? Do you want writers to use smart quotes?
- What are some common acronyms used in your industry? Do you use periods after each letter in an acronym?
- Are there any industry terms that should be written in a standard way? For example, do you want it written website or Web site? Login or log-in?
- What company-specific terms do you use, and how do you want them written?

A company stylebook is useful for both internal marketing writers and freelance writers. Especially if you're a freelance writer for the first time with a company, you probably don't know the company very well yet, and a style guide will help you learn the company's standards. A consistent style also serves as an editing guide. When you want to give the copy a final edit, use the company stylebook to keep it consistent.

Secret Fifteen:

Make sure the writing is good and that it is edited well

The powerful secret about writing is that it's rare for the lightning bolt of inspiration to strike and make the words magically flow from your fingers. Writing begins with simply sitting down and putting together words into sentences and sentences into paragraphs. It also begins with getting in the right headspace and giving yourself enough time and a distraction-free environment to write.

The other writing secret is that most writers don't fall in love with what they write the first time. You probably won't, either. And you shouldn't. The first draft is rough and messy. You should expect to edit and change your work. And you should expect a marketing director to edit your work, whether you're an internal writer or a freelancer.

Each piece you produce represents the company you're writing for. If you want the company to have a reputation for quality, your content writing needs to show the same quality. Editing and rewriting shows discipline and care for what you're producing.

If you don't use the tools of English properly, you'll look like you don't know what you're talking about, which will hurt your reputation. Taking the time to properly edit and apply the rules of grammar, spelling, punctuation, and style inspires your reader's confidence. You'll have well-edited pieces that people want to read.

Always reread your work critically, asking how it can be better. When possible, have someone else read it before you release it to an audience. If that's not possible, reading it out loud is a great trick.

Here are some practical things you can check for as you edit:

- Pay attention to the clarity of your sentences and any missing words.
- Check the organization of your quotes. Are they spread evenly throughout the piece?
- Check the formatting of your quotes. Is each in its own paragraph? Is the attribution properly placed at the end of the quote or at the natural end of a sentence? Are speakers identified properly?
- Check your transitions. Are they strong? Is there adequate flow from one topic to the next, and into and out of quotes? Do they move the reader through the piece?
- Check your verbs. Are they active? Are nouns strong and descriptive? Are adjectives strong? Are there any clichés that need to be eliminated?
- Does the story flow? Does it have good rhythm? Are any parts dull, weak or wordy?

Each piece you produce represents the company you're writing for. If you want your company to have a reputation for quality, your content marketing also needs to show the same quality.

Conclusion

There you have it—15 journalism secrets that you can apply to writing marketing pieces. As content marketing continues to be a major part of companies' marketing plans, good writing is more important than ever. And not just good writing, but writing that keeps the audience at the forefront.

Journalists have spent their professional lives training to do just that—appeal to an audience through their writing. If you want to write content that engages the target audience of any company you work for, using some of these secrets from journalism can help.

Content marketing is a great career avenue, but it has to be done right. While these secrets aren't guarantees to turn your content writing into brilliant sales pieces, they can certainly help you show that you care about your audience and the companies you work for. That caring will shine through your writing, putting you on the path to meeting your writing goals, and helping any company meet its marketing goals.

About the Author

Jennifer Thornberry is a writer and editor with 15 years of experience in journalism and teaching. Now, she specializes in helping businesses tell their stories and connect with customers.

Because of her journalism background, she knows how to write for an audience and produce clean, error-free content. Over the course of her career, she learned to be a fast, versatile writer who can take complex information and present it to an audience. She also knows how to conduct an interview and research, and enjoys getting to know different people and learning about new topics.

Jennifer's copy-editing skills are almost obsessive-compulsive. She'll notice misspelled words, abused apostrophes and run-on sentences in online copy and news stories.

Jennifer has taught journalism writing classes at the college level, which sharpened her group presentation skills. She also learned more about online technology and web delivery.

Jennifer lives in Louisville, Ky., with her husband and three cats. Like most mothers of furbabies, she thinks her cats are the cutest in the world, but unabashedly adores most members of the feline species.

If you want to learn more about the services Jennifer offers, check out her website at www.jenniferthornberry.com