

The Heartbeat of Powerful Copywriting

By Will Newman

Quick survey:

Which sentence in each group gives you a clearer picture of what's happening?

- He ran hurriedly from the table.
- He bolted from the table.
- Natural pain relievers move more quickly through your bloodstream than synthetic ones.
- Natural pain relievers surge through your bloodstream faster than synthetic ones.
- The marauding gang overtook the defenders.
- The marauding gang overwhelmed the defenders.

Not much doubt, is there? The second sentences are more visual than the first. You can picture what's happening easier because of one small part of the better sentences.

The verb.

Revisiting seventh grade English: The verb is "a word that expresses action, being, or state of being." Ho hum. I much prefer Karen Elizabeth Gordon's description. This author of numerous, entertaining, and offbeat grammar books calls them "the heartbeat of a sentence."

Verbs bring life to your writing. They — not adverbs — are what really paint that all-important picture for your reader.

The Master of Horror on the horror of weak verbs ...

A little bit of English review again. Adverbs are the words we attach to verbs to describe how someone is doing something: Run hurriedly ... move quickly ... yell loudly.

Adverbs often — but not always — end in "-ly." (And not all -ly words are adverbs.) We were taught by our teachers to dress up our writing with these words. But here's what Stephen King says about them ...

"The adverb is not your friend ... With adverbs, the writer usually tells us he or she is afraid he/she isn't expressing himself/herself clearly, that he or she is not getting the point or the picture across."

Stephen King
On Writing

It's natural to use adverbs when you're writing. If there's one editing lesson I could imbue all my readers with, it's this. Do *not* edit while you write. So if it's natural for you to use adverbs in your first draft as it is for me, by all means use them. Eliminate them in your rewrites and edits.

But don't eliminate them simply by deleting them. Eliminate your *need to use them* by examining the verb you're using. Make your verbs strong.

Stephen King's example: "He closed the door firmly" vs. "He slammed the door."

You hear "slam" in your mind's ear. "Close firmly" not as much.

My examples: "He ran hurriedly ..." vs. "He bolted ..." Bolted conveys not only the image of the man leaving in a hurry, but it also carries a sense of urgency the adverb doesn't have.

Not all verbs are created equal ...

Look at the third example we started with. Neither of those sentences contains an adverb. "Overtook" isn't bad, but "overwhelmed" is clearly the stronger choice. "Overtook" gives the picture of the gang catching up with the defenders. "Overwhelmed" paints a picture of the gang climbing over the bodies of the defenders.

Here's the strategy: First, go through your copy and find adverbs. Eliminate them and replace the weak verbs they were bolstering. Then go back over the copy. This time, examine other verbs and replace weak ones with stronger, more active ones.

What is your clue that a verb you're using might be weak? The first verbs that come to mind while writing are the ones we use every day. Because of that, they've lost much of their impact. Look for less common verbs to replace the common ones.

Say "XYZ Corporation will annihilate its competition in the 3rd quarter" rather than "XYZ Corporation will kill its competition in the 3rd quarter."

Coming to grips with '-ing' ...

I'm guilty of weakening my verbs by using their '-ing' form. Oops, like there. I could have (and should have) said "I use weak verbs when I use the '-ing' form."

It's just how I write — the first time through. When you use the '-ing' form, you add length to the verb, which can weaken its impact. And you often need to add more words to the sentence, as you can see in my example. In copywriting, you don't want to skimp on words, but your every word must be necessary.

Hacking out the '-ing' form helps eliminate unnecessary words and strengthens your copy.

All of them?

Should you eradicate all your adverbs? Should you abolish the '-ing' form to your rhetorical wastebasket?

Not at all. Adverbs and the '-ing' form of the verb have their place. The trick is to make sure you use the strongest verbs you can and avoid the '-ing' form of verbs where it counts most.

Where's that? In copywriting, it's where you paint your picture of the reader's life as the product has changed it. Or where you describe the product's benefits. Or where you describe what the reader might lose by ignoring the opportunity you're giving him.

When you need to make the biggest impression, that's when you wear your fanciest clothing.

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3 Responses to "The Heartbeat of Powerful Copywriting"

This is an eye opener of the use of verb.

I have never heard or read that verb is the life wire on a sentence and how it reinforce the picture one intends to paint to the readers.

Thanks a million for this write up. I'm now begin to understand what copywriting is.

A blogger of Hot Christian news

Guest (Kayode) – over a year ago

Great article. I love the idea of not editing while you write, something I do a lot! Using stronger verbs is definitely the way to go to make the copy pop. Thank you!

Guest (Tina) – over a year ago

This has definitely been a weak area for me. I didn't know how to fix this. Now I do. Thanks.

Cheryl Sharp – over a year ago

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