

An Analysis of Grammar Usage in Copywriting

Liberty White

Indiana University

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Abstract

A short analysis of grammar usage in copywriting, the discipline of writing used in advertisements. Copywriting often features intentional grammar deviations. Grammar mistakes, however, can damage a brand's reputation. Examples of grammar mistakes and grammar deviations are used to explain their impact on advertising. In order to be successful, copywriters must learn how to manipulate grammar effectively to know how and when to use grammar deviations. Overall, grammar usage in copywriting is analyzed for the purpose of understanding how grammar deviations and grammar mistakes differ, with an emphasis on using grammar deviations effectively in conversational copywriting.

Keywords: grammar deviations, grammar mistakes, copywriting, conversational copywriting, copy, advertising, brand, audience.

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The writing in advertising is called copy; thus, copywriting is writing for advertising. Copywriting “borrows from all other fields of writing in its quest for creative expression, but there is no room for your personality in the copy that you write; it is the brand’s voice that must come through, loudly and clearly” (Shaw 2012). Although copywriting is highly specialized, copywriters do not always need to use perfect grammar; however, having a poor understanding of grammar will discredit a copywriter’s ability and make them appear unprofessional. A copywriter’s use of grammar is often affected by their copywriting specialization and should always keep their specific audience in mind. When copywriters break grammar rules, they should have the ability to explain how and why they deviated if questioned. Grammar mistakes are unintentional or unenlightened, but grammar deviations are intentionally broken grammar rules that elevate the copy.

All good writers, including copywriters, should learn the function and rules of proper grammar. Without a good grasp on grammar, copywriters will neither understand when they’re unintentionally breaking grammar rules nor will they know how to use grammar deviations effectively. Understanding grammar and understanding linguistics helps build a copywriter’s instincts for creating clear communication. Communicating effectively is critical to the success of advertising. If the audience does not understand the copy, they will not be persuaded.

Copy with embarrassing or excessive grammar mistakes is not only difficult to read, but it can restrict certain ads from getting approved. In her article, “10 Advertising Mistakes That Will Destroy Your Credibility,” Erin Sagin claims that improper punctuation, capitalizing random words, adding emojis, using too many exclamation points, and putting numbers in words may keep prospective Google ads from getting approved (Sagin 2020). Poor grammar can also discredit the brand being advertised by making them look unprofessional. If there are mistakes in

their advertisements, it can make a brand appear mediocre, as if their product or services are as inferior as their advertisements. Advertisements help build brand recognition and trust. A brand with a slew of mistakes in their ads, then, will be known for being inferior.

For example, in a digital ad for the marketing company HubSpot, their copy read, “Public relations has changed. Are your press releases been keeping up?” [Fig. 1]. This illegible ad was



Fig. 1; Stec, C. (2020).

advertising a blog post on how to write modern press releases. This can easily make their audience lose trust in their ability to be an authority on writing press releases or any other content. Although HubSpot later included this mistake in their own article “11 Embarrassing Spelling and Grammar Mistakes from Brands,” this typo likely damaged the trust they built with their audience and turned away new readers. Typos and grammar mistakes sometimes slip through several people, or even several departments, making them an unavoidable part of life; however, copywriters can limit the frequency of mistakes by studying proper grammar and good editing practices.

Grammar deviations are not always mistakes; copywriting sometimes uses conversational, casual tones depending on the purpose of the copy. Effective grammar deviations should only be used when applicable. In her book, *The Copywriter's Toolkit: The Complete Guide to Strategic Advertising Copy*, Margo Berman asks readers, “Should the message sound whimsical, authoritative, informative, concerned, lighthearted, mysterious, friendly, cool, trendy, sophisticated, or something else? If you were discussing open-heart surgery, you wouldn’t want to sound too casual” (2012). The style of copy should reflect the brand, the advertisement brief, and the audience. Effective grammar deviations are valuable when creating an accessible tone

that helps the audience feel like they are having a conversation with the brand. While copywriters sometimes need to write about serious topics, having a strong grasp on how to use grammar deviations effectively will always be useful.

Perhaps one of the most famous grammar deviations in advertising is the “got milk?” campaign for the California Milk Processor Board by Goodby Silverstein & Partners. “If you were to put that through the grammar filter, it would come out as something more like “Do You

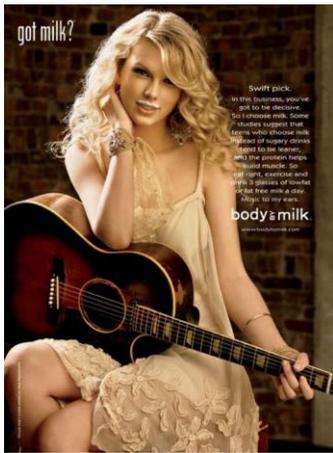


Fig. 2; Goodby Silverstein & Partners. (2008).

Have Milk?" But that's dry, and awful. Got milk? was catchy, simple and created a craze” (Suggett 2019). They used celebrity endorsements to further amplify their campaign, from Taylor Swift [Fig. 2] and Beyonce, to Wolverine, Batman, and even Dr. Phil. “Got milk?” may not be grammatically correct, but it is succinct and to the point. It is a great example of how something short and punchy can

have a big impact on consumers and the advertising industry. It went on to inspire many mock graphics, such as “got tom petty?” bumper stickers and even an ad by PETA with milk coming out of a man’s nose with the copy, “got milk? If you knew how dairy cows suffered, you’d spew” (PETA 2015). However the ad is adapted, it is still an effective and successful use of grammar deviation.

Another successful grammar deviation comes from Nutella, the popular chocolate hazelnut spread. Their advertising campaign “spread the happy” is not grammatically correct, but it is effective [Fig. 3]. “A widely-used trick in advertising is to turn an adjective into a noun. A perfect example comes from Nutella, which took a common phrase (spread happiness) into something much more memorable and punchy” (Suggett 2019). Nutella’s ad is not written to be graded by an English professor; rather, it is expressing an inspiring sentiment to the general

public to enhance brand awareness. It allows consumers to associate Nutella with happiness and sharing. Using the word “happiness” rather than “happy” would be grammatically correct, but it



spread the happy

Fig. 3; Brand Programming Studios, Inc. (2017).

is not as succinct. It also is not unique. “spread the happy” spins a common phrase and the graphic design further unifies the copy with the brand by mirroring the packaging design. As Paul Suggett mentioned, turning an adjective into a noun is an interesting way to spin common phrases into something catchy. Another example of turning an adjective into a noun is Sephora’s campaign tag “celebrate your extraordinary” (Logan 2016). Although turning adjectives into nouns is a common technique, it should not be a go-to option to avoid due diligence.

From Chick-fil-A’s “Eat mor chikin” to Apple’s “Think different,” grammar deviations are never hard to find in good copywriting. A major goal of advertising is to tell a strategic, memorable story that influences consumers’ gut feeling for a brand. With Chick-fil-A, they are not being pushy or explicitly saying: eat more chicken; rather, they built their brand around bad-spelling cows who are trying to save themselves by getting consumers to eat more chicken. It is simultaneously funny and plays to consumers’ sympathies. The genius of Apple’s “Think different,” used from 1997 to 2002, is that it can be interpreted in different ways. Not only does it describe the company’s different approach, but it challenges consumers to be different and unique, too, building a brand loyal following that believes in doing things differently. Being different sets brands apart and makes them memorable, increasing brand recognition.

Advertising falls flat without effective communication. Sometimes, only an image is needed to communicate the core message. However, words are often used to fully engage with

the consumer. These words do not always follow proper grammar because they are part of conversational copywriting and are tailored to how the target audience speaks.

When tailored to its desired audience, after rigorous study of consumer segments, advertisements that use conversational copy can be highly effective. It is a great way for a brand to appear relatable and accessible while also increasing sales. Nick Osborne of Copyblogger claims, “Conversational copywriting is still about selling ... but in a way that is honest, transparent, and respectful of your audience” (2018). While some may see conversational copywriting as dumbing down an idea, it is actually distilling down to the core of an idea, making the copy more succinct and accessible.

Conversational copywriting often uses contractions and other grammar deviations typically found in speech. It attempts to create a two-way street between the audience and the brand. Osborne continues, “To me, the power of conversational copywriting is self-evident. And it turns out that it’s also the perfect fit for the web. After all, the web is by its very nature both social and conversational” (2018). Conversational copy is highly applicable to today’s market. For Vox, Kurt Wagner reports that “New estimates from eMarketer show that US advertisers will spend more than \$129 billion on digital advertising in 2019 — more than the \$109 billion they plan to spend on traditional advertising” (2019). This conversational style is often seen on ads and brand accounts on social media websites and is becoming more prominent as more advertising moves to an interactive platform where conversations are the norm. Copywrite Matters founder Belinda Weaver’s four tips for good conversational copywriting are:

- 1) Use contractions like they’re, hasn’t, wasn’t and you’re.
- 2). Use words like I, me, we and you over third-person references.
- 3) Use simple, straightforward language.

- 4) Don't be afraid of being familiar or injecting personality – as long as it fits with your brand voice (2013).

These are the basics of how to use conversational copywriting, but the most important step in conversational copywriting is understanding the audience. This is where a multi-disciplinary study is beneficial for copywriters. Marketing demographics, consumer behavior, linguistics, and more are all helpful in getting to know an audience and how they speak. Words such as bet, buggy, butter, dope, fixing, peninsula, sugar, and pasties all have different meanings depending on what region of the United States the target audience is in, and the list is endless. Whether the audience is national or international, it is important to consider that words have different meanings to different people. Effective communication between a father and son from Baton Rouge, Louisiana will differ from effective communication between two elderly sisters in Glasgow, Scotland; in their oral and written communications, their grammar is most likely improper, too. This is where conversational copywriting shines. So, like all copywriting, even conversational copywriting needs to be carefully considered. Simply because effective conversational copywriting seems effortless does not mean the process is also effortless.

Copywriting is a specialist subject that requires a multi-disciplinary approach, creativity, and a strong understanding of grammar. Successful copywriters do not always use proper grammar; they often deviate for specific reasons and can describe the rule they broke and why they broke it. Grammar deviations differ from grammar mistakes, in that they are intentional and more effective than proper grammar would be. While copywriters always have the goal of selling something, effective conversational copywriting makes a brand approachable. So, rather than

talking to a pushy salesman, the audience is talking to a friend. Ultimately, great copywriters with successful advertisements are creative thinkers who use grammar deviations.



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