

COPYWRITERS' GUIDES

TALEIST

AGENCY

WRITING CASE STUDIES THAT SELL

13 tips for writing case studies that persuade prospects to buy



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13 tips for case studies that get
your prospects to buy

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	3
1. Make notes.....	4
2. Write in word pictures	4
3. How does the person move?.....	5
4. Listen to how people speak.....	5
5. Relax, everybody's first drafts are terrible	5
6. Verbs are the Flintstone feet powering your writing.....	6
7. No passengers	6
8. Phone a friend	7
9. Think gin	7
10. Give it a name	8
11. Don't bottle it up.....	9
12. What time is it?	9
13. Surprise	10
What next?	11
Acknowledgements	12

Introduction

Every month, a local real estate agent drops a flyer into the office mailbox. The flyer comprises a list of addresses and sale prices. The real estate agent calls this a list of “case studies”.

They’re not case studies. What she’s printed is a list of facts. The list isn’t even the case study’s cousin-once-removed, the testimonial.

A testimonial looks like this:

“Sharon from LJ McRaine convinced buyers that having only an outhouse was a great way to get the steps up on their Fitbits.” — Steven Lewis

A case study is a story. And a story has a beginning, a middle and an end.

Not every transaction is worthy of a case study. You order from Crust. You wait. The pizza arrives. It’s a beginning, a middle and an end, but to what purpose?

Case studies are for when you have prospects who aren’t sure what you might have in store for them. They want proof that your service works for people like them. This is where a case study comes in. A case study is a risk-free rehearsal of how your prospects will feel if they become clients.

If you doubt that, think about the books you’ve read or the films you’ve seen.

I haven’t been a US Coast Guard rescue swimmer. Even so, I know how I’d feel if a buddy died on a mission. Kevin Costner helped me rehearse that in *The Guardian*. (Thanks to Kevin, I walked out of the cinema with sunglasses glued over my pink eyes.)

Your case study probably won't make a prospect cry. However, you want them to *feel* something.

Yes, it's business writing, but it doesn't have to be scrubbed clean of humanity.

Here's how to be businesslike *and* give your prospect a rehearsal...

1. Make notes

Your case study doesn't have to be about big description. It's not journalism.

However, the magic is often about one or two details. Look for the telling details that bring someone to life. Does he have a giant's handshake? Is her desk as clear as a hermit's calendar?

Relying on your memory will seem like a bad idea when you sit down to write. You might find yourself back at your desk and find all your mental video camera captured was the subject's greasy hair.

Pro tip: Take the notes even if you're sure you won't need them.

2. Write in word pictures

Word pictures are sketches hung in the reader's mind by careful word choice. The booth at the radio station was like a Tardis. The surgeon's waiting area was like the lobby of the Four Seasons.

Take your paint brush and flick some colour at the reader. It takes only small things — the client's orange tie — to make your writing vivid.

3. How does the person move?

Describing someone, it's not just what they look like; it's also about their gestures.

Think of it as like the direction in the plays you read in school. "Gary folds his arms as he says, 'I'm not sure about what you're offering'."

How does your subject move their hands? How do they sit? Where do they point their head when they ask a question?

4. Listen to how people speak

It's not just *what* people say, it's *how* they say it.

Pay attention to the tone of your subject's voice. Listen to how they put their sentences together.

We record interviews at Taleist to capture *exactly* what someone said.

Nothing is more real than real.

One of our clients employs engineers. Engineers operate in a physical world, something their speech reflects. In conversation, their language is all about *grabbing* chances and "*riding* bow waves". So we inject muscular language into their copywriting.

5. Relax, everybody's first drafts are terrible

One draft won't cut it.

Drop that nugget into a sock and smash it into the face of writers' block.

If you know your first draft will be shitty however long you dither, why delay putting fingers to keyboard? Flush that first draft onto the page because you can't fix what you haven't yet written.

And be cool with your trying-hard self. All great writers will tell you: Great writing happens in editing...

6. Verbs are the Flintstone feet powering your writing

Verbs stomp on the fingers of adjectives and adverbs. “Strode” throws sand in the face of “walked quickly”.

However, don't worry so much about verb choice in the first draft. You can punch up the verbs in the second and third drafts. (In the first draft of this guide, “punch up” was “edit” in the previous sentence.)

7. No passengers

In the second draft, strip out passenger words. Be like Pac-Man hunting Blinky, Pinky, Inky, and Clyde.

First, gobble up all the “thats” that you don't need. (“Thats” are like cockroaches — find one and there'll be a dozen laying eggs under the fridge.)

Next, put the hard word on equivocations. There's no place in your case study for “I think”, “actually”, “just”, “only” and their fence-sitting buddies.

You don't “seem” to have lost the file you can't find. You've lost it.

Third, zap adverbs and adjectives. Would James Bond's Aston Martin be sexier if it were "very" fast? No. It wouldn't even be faster—"very fast" is twice as long as "fast" so it takes twice as long to read.

8. Phone a friend

A proofreader was employed to work on *Dryer's English*, Benjamin Dryer's modern classic on writing flawless English.

So what, you ask?

Benjamin Dryer is Random House's chief copy editor. So what makes you think *you* can proofread *your* own work?

Your smallest typo is a pothole jarring the reader out of your flow.

Also, grammatical screechers break the reader's trust in you. If you can't tell the difference between "lose" and "loose", what else have you got wrong?

That's true if you're writing an annual report. And it's still true if you're blistering Qantas with a tweet about flight delays.

9. Think gin

Without juniper berries, gin is just rocket fuel. Similarly, spice your case study with word botanicals and it'll slide down easier than a gin gimlet at an agency party.

Describe what you saw: “The lobby was a study in Swiss design, a wall covered in cuckoo clocks and a reception desk balanced on pyramid-shaped chocolates.”

Craft metaphors: “Our robot is taking toddler steps towards world domination.”

Liken one thing to another to make it relatable: Known as a “simile” in the trade, likening one thing to another makes the meaning go down —

“What the hell is copywriting?”

“Copywriting is like having a salesperson in writing”.

10. Give it a name

Give your subject their real name and title and your reader will bond with them.

“Steven L.” is fine if Steven L. is giving a testimonial about your help moderating his savage fantasies about people who say “myself” when they mean “me”.

But why “L.”, not “Lewis”, if Steven is giving you a case study about your renovation skills? Was Steven L. putting in a basement growroom and he’s worried the cops will read your case study?

11. Don't bottle it up

Your case study isn't the story of how two robots transacted, so there was emotion in there somewhere. How did your client feel at the start? Frustrated? Uncertain? Overwhelmed? And how do they feel now? Delighted? Surprised?

You don't have to go nuts. No one expects the CEO to marry Julia Roberts in the end.

The corporate devil on your shoulder says business writing is sterile. This devil of sterility wants you to set the emotional dial to zero.

Before you succumb, listen to the angel on your other shoulder. This angel speaks for your reader. The angel is begging you to make your case study interesting.

Try setting the emotional dial to at least 3. It should be enough to sweep the devil of sterility off your shoulder.

12. What time is it?

Nervous about describing the people in your story? You can ease into your descriptive powers by describing time and place.

There's a reason so many stories start "once upon a time". It signals the child that they're reading a story. Sure, "once upon a time" is no way to start your case study about data centre software. However, it's not beyond your descriptive powers to set your story in a time and place.

“All over Sydney, frisbees were coming out of cupboards at the end of a long winter...”

Again, nudge the dial clockwise from where you’re comfortable. Do it because you want people to read your case study and they’re more likely to read a story, which means you have to describe *something*.

13. Surprise

Holy shit!

Gracious me, that foul language was unexpected.

And it was a low trick because there’s nothing surprising here. But if you can set off a flash-bang in your case study, it’ll help.

Was something going on that reader might not have anticipated? Did something unexpected happen?

Put another way, if everything in your case study is expected, you’ve not got much of a story.

What next?

If you want persuasive case studies that turn prospects into customers, Taleist's team of copywriters and recovering journalists know how to bring every story to life.

You'll find us at Taleist.Agency or email writers@taleist.agency.

Acknowledgements

In 2015 Taleist published a podcast series on storytelling, *Talemaking*.

Over 17 episodes, we interviewed all kinds of storytellers, not just the ones who used words. As well as writers like bloggers, authors and travel journalists, I spoke to a music producer, an Instagram expert and a personal stylist (because your clothes tell a story about you).

One of the experts I was lucky enough to tape was the novelist and corporate storyteller [Claire Scobie](#) from [Wordstruck](#). Claire's thoughts on writing case studies inspired this guide. Thank you, Claire.