Content Team - Writing Best Practices

Here are some general thoughts to help guide writers for Booth marketing efforts, provided by content team members.

Don’t fall in love with your first draft.

If an editor asks to change anything, it’s because they see an issue with what you originally proposed. They may not have the correct solution or they may need clarification, but the right path forward is almost never sticking with what you wrote originally. Seek a synthesis combining their perspective and your original intention toward a new, better solution that works for both of you.

Take a breather.

If you find yourself hitting a wall, set your manuscript aside and come back to it in a few hours or in a day or two (assuming you’re still on track with your deadlines). You may find that taking some time away lets you come back to a piece with fresh eyes. You’ll see the piece how your reader will experience it for the first time, and as such, you’ll be better able to spot places where you need to tighten and clarify the text.

Give your editor time to do their job.

At minimum, this means you have to hit your deadlines. If you’re not sure of your deadline, confirm with the editor when they need the piece to be able to edit it carefully. An imperfect first draft is better than a late first draft.

However, don’t confuse “imperfect” with sloppy. Check for spelling and grammar check and write the headlines, decks, and setup copy. Get the story into as close to the final format it will appear as possible. For video scripts, give an idea of the visuals, the text on screen, and any voiceover elements. For social posts of different formats, do your best to re-create the reality of what the story will look like on the platform, so your editor can easily see the context of your copy.

This gives your editor context and a sense of what the final piece would look like, which makes for a much more nuanced edit.

Be specific and write “tight” copy.

No matter the length of a story, always strive to be as specific as possible in your writing, and as economical as you can be. Getting specifics may involve asking extra questions or doing research to find out more details about a subject, their job, something they mention in a quote, etc.

The shorter the copy, the more important specific details and tight writing are to distinguish each post. But be careful with longer stories as well—often, longer stories become “loose, baggy monsters” (to quote Henry James). Make logical transitions from paragraph to paragraph.

Trim quotes to only the most compelling statements, moving everything else into the narrative or out of the story. Provide the necessary grounding details to keep the reader oriented in the story, without extraneous details.

Academic G. Kim Blank has an insightful analogy here: Compare the words in your sentence to the physical stuff you own. What would you sell in a yard sale? What can’t you live without? (See Blank’s excellent blog post for a comprehensive list of “waffling, fuzzy” words to banish from the page to de-clutter your writing.)

Lastly, challenge yourself to avoid clichés, jargon, and industry buzzwords. If everyone else is saying it, why would you? Relying on a cliché can be an indication that you need to think about your point more thoroughly and dig deeper in order to to say something original.

Don’t leave work for the editor that you could do.

The more you function as your own editor, the more

a) Your actual editor will love you.

b) You will be sure the story comes out exactly the way you envision it.

Here are some ways people leave work for the editor, which are touched on elsewhere to some extent:

Not writing headlines, deck, or setup copy.

This is literally the first thing a reader sees, so leaving it out is leaving a hugely important copy element to the editor.

Not cleaning up quotes.

Unless it’s an as-told-to, only quote people saying things that are fascinating. Often, a large part of a quote can be told narratively, because it is just factual set-up for the actual “subjective” aspect of the quote. Often, first drafts of copy run long quotes (whether for a social post or feature), and on a second look, you realize you can condense in ways to make the actual quote stand out more and have more impact.

Not write to spec.

Writing too long or too short, or not including aspects the editor required, even for good reason, is often going to leave work for the editor. If you do need to break spec, explain to the editor before you turn in the piece, or at minimum when you turn it in. Don’t “not” acknowledge it.

Fill in the grounding details.

Key details make your story relatable and readable, and they help the reader navigate. The more complex the topic or subject, the more these key details ground the reader.

Adding in details like a person’s company, where they’re from, what their job title is, where a conversation took place, what the chronology is—all these help ground the reader.
If you leave out details that are essential to “comprehensibility,” that leaves work for the editor. Often, they don’t have access to the same information you have from doing an interview.

**Don’t “write around.”**

Never try to just “do without” or cover up for a missing detail, quote, source, explanation, or context when writing a story. Reinterview, do more research, review transcripts, and find additional sources to get the information that you need.

**Further reading**

*“8 Writing Tips I Wish I Knew Before I Started Blogging,”* by Clifford Chi, Hubspot

*“200 Journalism Cliché’s to avoid,”* by the Washington Post

*Wordiness, Wordiness, Wordiness List,* by G. Kim Blank, University of Victoria