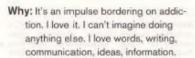# Robert W. Bly

He has been called "perhaps the most famous copywriter of them all." From his office in Dumont, N.J., Robert W. Bly, author of the popular guide *The Copywriter's Handbook*, has been a full-time freelance copywriter for 20 years. The job, often described as "selling with words," involves creating such products as ads, news releases, press kits, brochures, direct-mail letters and Web sites. As a "side gig," Bly, 44, has also written or co-authored some 50 books, most on business topics (though his oeuvre includes such lighter fare as *Star Trek* quiz books). He has made a specialty of direct mail, he says, because it lets him write in a more personal voice and its success can be precisely measured. Copywriting novices, he reports, can earn $40,000 to $60,000 a year; savvy veterans, $75,000 to $150,000; and "superstars," $200,000 to $500,000 a year or more if they specialize in direct mail.

Credits: author/co-author of *Write More, Sell More, The Elements of Technical Writing, The Online Copywriter's Handbook* and many other books.

Why: It's an impulse bordering on addiction. I love it. I can't imagine doing anything else. I love words, writing, communication, ideas, information.

How: For a nonfiction book, I make a detailed outline of the chapters and subheads within each chapter, and then basically fill them in with text. For copywriting, my process is to gather and digest research, then write headlines that represent different concepts until I find one that works. Once I pick the concept and the client agrees, I do a rough outline, then a first draft, then polish until satisfied. Most work is done on a PC, though I do print out and read hard copies with a red pencil after each draft. Alternating between hard copy and PC for draft review helps keep me fresh.

Ideas: For copywriting, I continually study the market. By studying what others are mailing and taking note of which direct-mail packages are being mailed over and over again, you can find out what is working and adapt those winning techniques. A direct-mail package that is successful and is mailed repeatedly is called a "control."

Studying controls is the best education you can get about what works and what doesn't in direct mail. For books, I tend to write about things I have learned about through practical experience and can therefore teach others about.

Research: The more, the better. You are not trying to be clever; you're trying to be relevant: Find out what about this particular product would make people want to buy it. You can never do too much research. (The preparation process I follow is on the Methodology page of www.bly.com.)

Success secret: In freelancing copywriting, the people who are busiest and most successful are those who are the best at marketing and promoting themselves, and at client service. Lots of people can write copy, but they don't know how to get clients. Another secret: You don't want assignments; you want clients. Too many freelance writers fail to realize the profits are in repeat orders for the same client, and do not do nearly enough to cultivate good client relationships. Another tip: Specialize in an industry (e.g., health care) or format (e.g., annual reports, direct mail). Specialists are more in demand and get paid better than generalists.

Writer's block: I don't get it because I use a method I learned from Isaac Asimov: Work on many different projects at one time. If I get stuck on a direct-mail package, I can turn to my book project and write that until ideas for the direct-mail piece start to flow again. If I have to stop the book because I need more research, and don't have an idea for the direct mail yet, I turn to another project, like writing a Web site or ad. And so on.

Other advice: My book *Secrets of a Freelance Writer* shares everything I have learned about being a freelance copywriter. Others in the field have also written books (a recent one is *The Well-Fed Writer* by Peter Bowerman). Reading a book by someone in the field can shave years off your learning curve. Whatever you decide to write, make up your mind to be the best. It's the only edge you have over your competitors. Be a student of your craft and art.