



The Secrets of Master Copywriter, Mentor, and Bestselling Author Bob Bly

By Paul Hollingshead

Bob Bly is one of the most successful copywriters working today. He cut his teeth as a business-to-business copywriter back in the late 1970s and early 1980s, but in more recent years, he's taken on literally hundreds of varied products and services – from financial newsletters to (as I discovered chatting with him today) – burial plots.

In other words, if you've got something to sell, Bob will find a way. (Wait till you hear the innovative way he sold medical reference books ... to people who already had one!)

He's also one of the most prolific writers working today, though he's not likely to agree. But with 80 books to his credit (including the ubiquitous "Copywriter's Handbook")... plus hundreds of articles written for AWAI and the industry ... his own information-jammed website and materials ... and, of course, the thousands of promotions he's written for all those clients over the past 30 years ... it's not an argument he'll win with us.

Like many who write, Bob is an introvert. He hates to travel (but will if he must) ... abhors small talk (the idea of it "terrifies" him, he admits) ... and shuns crowds, much preferring the relative solitude of his home office where he writes while listening to an eclectic list of music ranging from Del Shannon to Eminem.

Yet, despite this very private side, Bob is one of the most energetic, animated, and downright funny speakers at Bootcamp – where when he's not "performing" his greatest copywriting hits on the stage, he's always ready to sit down in a quiet corner with a writer-in-waiting and share his best advice.

I remember one woman at a recent Bootcamp who'd just met him describing him in her best schoolgirl voice, no less, as "loveable – like a big ol' teddy bear" ... and somehow I knew exactly what she meant.

I spoke with Bob on a typical Friday morning from his New Jersey home.

Although it was tempting to pick his brain about how to be a great writer, we thought it best to talk to him about what it's like to be a copywriter ... specifically, a copywriter as respected and successful as Bob Bly.

Good morning, Bob. Okay. It's early on a work-day, 9:45 a.m. to be exact. Where are you ... and what are you wearing?

It's funny ... now, normally I'd be wearing casual clothes – slacks, button-down shirt, sneakers. Today, as it happens, I'm wearing pajamas here in my home office. God knows why. I never do. I guess I just got preoccupied with things and never got changed.

Are you in bare feet, by chance?

I never have bare feet. I hate to destroy the USP of the magazine, but I have horrible-looking feet, so I always wear socks for the benefit of everyone ... myself included. In fact, I think most men should cover their feet at all times.

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What project are you working on right now?

It's an odd one ... you may laugh at it. But I am writing a direct mail package designed to generate leads for a cemetery.

I know copywriters who would die for a project like that. How is it going?

This company is actually a chain of cemeteries in the United States and they're marketing pre-needs. So the sales premise is: "Don't wait until you're dead. Buy your cemetery plot now," so that when you do pass away, you save your loved ones an enormous amount of trouble. This is something I relate to personally because when my father passed away 15 years ago, one of the worries was: where should we bury him? We'd never discussed it and we only had a few days to decide and it was quite a problem.

You're known in the industry as a business-to-business writer. I know you've also had a lot of success writing financial letters aimed at consumers. Do you enjoy mixing things up? Or would you prefer to stay with one niche?

I do enjoy mixing things up, but I don't think it's a good strategy for new copywriters. As you gain more experience and have some success, you get offered more stuff and you can pick and choose the projects that interest you.

But I think it's wise to start in an area that interests you or that suits your background. When I started, I was purely business-to-business. In fact, I was even narrower than that. I did what was known as "industrial" copywriting. I wrote for industrial manufacturers, chemical companies, and heavy equipment manufacturers. I did that for five or ten years almost exclusively because that was my background.

Then one day, I got a call from someone connected to Agora Publishing and got an opportunity to work on a financial newsletter. While reviewing my copy with (Agora founder) Bill Bonner and Michael Masterson, they asked me if I'd be interested in writing more financial copy. Then Richard Stanton Jones from Philips Publishing called me, and that's how I got into writing financial copy.

What do you find hardest to write about?

For me, I think the hardest thing to write is consumer financial or consumer health. They certainly pay well, but the length and density of these packages have increased geometrically over the years. There's so much proof you need and it's getting tougher and tougher from a legal standpoint. So it takes more work to get a winner.

The easiest?

I think the easiest packages to write are for smaller businesses looking to generate a sale or a lead for a specific product because you don't need that sophisticated a package. So for this market, it's

possible to write an “A-minus” or “B-plus” letter and still have it do very well.

So writers starting out would be smart to “cut their teeth” writing for smaller businesses?

That would be my recommendation, yes. It’s like baseball. It’s always a good idea to develop your skills in the minor leagues working with good coaches like AWAI ... and work your way up to the big leagues. Plus, you may know someone with a small business you can help. Or you might find you enjoy working for small businesses. That’s a very good niche.

You’re not trying to discourage competition, are you now, Bob?

Not at all – at least not consciously anyway. You know as well as I do there’s *lots* of room for everyone in this business.

Do you still enjoy the writing process?

I do. I very much enjoy my home office. I’ve recently moved from an “official” office – which I loved, but gave it up when my wife was diagnosed with terminal cancer a few years ago. Luckily, she was *wrongfully* diagnosed. She still has cancer

– lymphoma – but it’s not terminal. And she has responded wonderfully to treatment.

When something like that happens, you appreciate having a job like we have – where you can make a living on your own terms and are able to adjust your life accordingly. So we added a third story with a big picture window that gives me a very nice view. I realize every day this is much better than having any regular job where you have to be somewhere and follow a lot of rules.

Who has influenced you in your career? What copywriters do you admire?

There are a lot of people I admire, but those who influenced me the most did so personally. Of the people whom I had dealings with, Sig Rosenblum – who is largely forgotten today – helped me early in my career. Milt Pierce is another man ... Richard Armstrong and I took an NYU copy course together with Milt and we both became lifelong friends of Milt’s. And early in my career, a fellow by the name of Ed McLean was very friendly towards me when he didn’t have to be, so that was very encouraging.

Can others learn from these folks?

For Sig and Milt, I’ve published e-books of their work. Milt’s you can find here: miltsmarketing-secrets.com. Sig’s is here: sigsmarketingsecrets.com. Otherwise, they’re not accessible. I’ve collected articles they’ve written and samples of their best letters, and you can find them in these e-books. For Ed McLean, he self-published two classic books on direct marketing called *The Basics of Copy* and *The Basics of Testing*.

Now, I don’t know where you can get them today. My copies have disappeared and they’re very valuable. I thought Boardroom or someone would have republished them by now. But as far as I’m aware, they’re not available, though I haven’t looked on eBay. If you don’t know Ed McLean, he wrote the classic *Newsweek* subscription letter that began something like, “If the list on which I



Bob Bly speaking with a Bootcamp attendee in Delray Beach

found your name is any indication, this won't be the first nor the last subscription letter you will receive..."

What did you learn from these folks early on?

I was working in corporate communications for Westinghouse at the time and these guys introduced me to the whole concept of sales writing. I thought I was doing sales writing, but they taught me *direct response* sales writing, where there's a big idea and an offer – something we never did at Westinghouse. We never had "offers" in our brochures where we actually asked our reader to do something specific like *buy* something.

I found the whole idea so exciting. Then, of course, when I learned that copywriters were paid relative to how many people responded to their letters, I thought this was a whole lot more interesting and exciting than just writing about "stuff." And I really liked the idea that we could instantly know whether our letters were working or not just by looking at the response.

Yes, one of my favorite parts of the job is looking at the results ... seeing the response rate. It's one of the very few jobs where you can see such an instantaneous and concrete measure of your success. There's nothing nebulous about it.

I want to get back to your home office for a moment. Describe your workspace for us.

I'm not good at dimensions, but it's a good size. It's on the top floor of my house. It's overlooking a heavily wooded area, so I have a beautiful "treetop" view. I have a desk that's facing a huge window. I work on a Dell desktop. I have another desk behind me with a backup computer incase this one goes kaput.

I have a lot of metal file cabinets, both in this room and another room attached to this one, where I keep a lot of stuff I've collected over the years ... and the usual stuff, a fax machine and a copier...

What do you keep in all those files?

I have a good-sized swipe file I can access at any time for ideas – it's something I recommend every copywriter start when they're starting out and keep building up over time. Plus, I have a lot of my own samples I can have ready to send any client who asks for them. I always make samples available for clients. I also keep plenty of testimonials for both my work and the writing resources I offer through my website.



Do you keep anything nearby to inspire you – a memento, favorite photograph, awards, those kinds of things?

It's funny, my favorite possession is something I framed – a cartoon from the Village Voice from 1981 that's a spoof on the ad agency business, and I just thought it was the cleverest thing I'd ever seen, so I framed it. I've got some nice pieces of art I got as a gift from a client. I have a framed copy of the cover of my book *The Copywriter's Handbook* that my publisher gave me. And I've got my college degrees because I like the look of it – that's about it. I used to have my office covered in my kids' artwork, but now that they're in college, not so much. I still have a few, though...

You've won plenty of awards over the years...

Yes, it's odd because never in my life have I entered an award contest, but occasionally clients

have submitted my work to them and I've won a few.

Which one are you most proud of?

I got the best kick out of AWAI's *Copywriter of the Year* award ... and I'm not just saying that because I'm talking to you. I won a Gold ECHO award from the DMA (Direct Marketing Association) many years ago for a business-to-business package that I had some success with. It was kind of innovative at the time and it was one of those outrageously expensive B2B packages where, thank God it worked out, because otherwise it would have been a lot of money down the drain.

Can you tell us a little about it?

It was a package to sell disaster recovery services, which is basically – like Hurricane Irene was a disaster here and I was out of power, unable to work for two days. And the company, U.S. West it was called, was selling these disaster recovery services to their large accounts. And we did an audio tape – this was years ago before CDs even – that basically dramatized a disaster event.

The audio was a busy office with machines humming, things beeping, people hustling. Then the announcer says something like: "This is the sound of a disaster," and the tape goes completely silent for about seven seconds – which is a long time when you're listening. And then it continues to play with a pitch for the services. So it was the cassette, a two-page letter, a brochure, and a reply form. And I think within 60 days, they had something like \$5.6 million worth of contracts.

Who was the first client you ever wrote for as a freelancer? Do you remember?

I wish I could remember the very first. I know the first financial package I wrote was for a gentleman by the name of Buddy Haden who was publisher of something called "Short on Values," which is about short-selling stocks. But before that, I did a lot of work selling PC software by mail. That used to be a very big business. In fact,

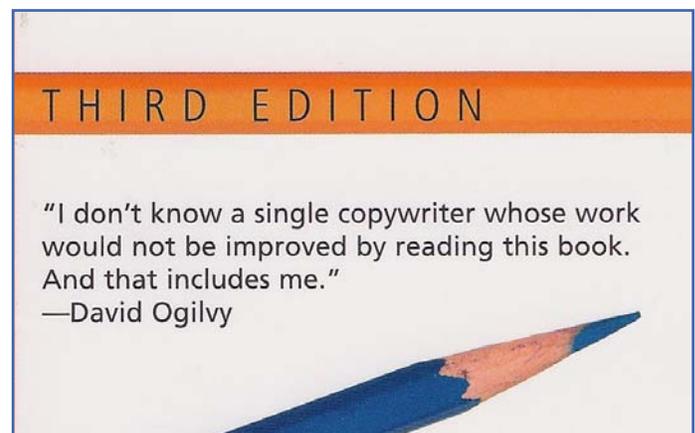
my career got a very nice launch when one of my early clients gave me a nice testimonial for some work I did selling some programming software.

You think all freelance writers should actively pursue testimonials?

Absolutely. One of the biggest boosts to my career came when I wrote *The Copywriter's Handbook* and David Ogilvy, the legendary copywriter from the '60s, gave me a very nice testimonial for the cover.

How did you come to know David Ogilvy?

I didn't. We just took a long shot and sent him a manuscript. He said he read it and sent me the quote: "*I don't know a single copywriter whose work would not be improved by reading this book. And that includes me.*" It was a nice thing for him to do and I was surprised he did it.



You've been writing for over 30 years now ... what is the best ad you've ever written – both in terms of its success and the one you're most proud of?

I have a mailing piece for a book called the *Physicians' Desk Reference* that I was very proud of when it beat the long-time control by 3 times. Now, this was one of these "couldn't be beat" controls, and every year, the publishers would call in copywriters and agencies to try to beat it.

Finally, I came up with this innovative idea and we mailed it and it tripled that “unbeatable” control’s numbers. That was very satisfying to me.

What was your idea for beating that control?

We sent a letter to people assuming they already had the book, or at least thought they had it at one time. We showed a big full-color picture of the old book with one of those red circles with a slash through it and the message: “*Warning, your Physicians’ Desk Reference is now out of date.*”

Then in the package was an actual sticker that said: “*Warning: Do not use this outdated PDR for prescribing or clinical decision making*” ... and the instructions were to immediately attach it to the old book until their new one arrived. And that was the big idea – that the old PDR copy was dangerously out of date and they needed to replace it with the new and dramatically updated version.

That’s very clever. I’m sure a lot of copywriters took a more traditional route and talked about how much “bigger and better” the new version was.

Yes, different thinking paid off in this case. We were very pleased. You can read about this campaign on my website bly.com by clicking “Case Studies.”

Speaking of which, how much time do you spend on the “idea” of your ad? Does it come easily to you? Where do you find them?

I spend half the time doing the research and coming up with the idea, and the other half writing the package. And no, it doesn’t always come easily. Sometimes, yes. But most times, it takes time. But it’s also a fun process. It’s the truly creative part of what we do.

A lot of writers have little rituals when it comes to writing. David Ogilvy liked to have

The Glicken

What is “glicken”? It’s a Yiddish word referring to the icing on the cake. That extra reward on top of the regular benefits you get as a Barefoot Writer. This month, we showcase Bob Bly.

In his decades-long career as a copywriter, Bob Bly has gotten plenty of little perks and freebies. The big one? Says Bob:

“Shortly after I wrote my book *Business-to-Business Direct Marketing*, I had a manager at a major software company call to say he read the book. He told me my representation of B2B in the book was just exactly the way his company viewed direct marketing.

“So he hired me to write for him at a good fee for the year, then at the end of the year, he called me up to say he needed to use up his budget and could he send me a check towards next year’s work? I said sure, thinking it would be a few thousand dollars. A few weeks later, I got a check for nearly \$70,000 in the mail. And I had made only \$6,000 from the book itself!”

Some other glicken Bob has collected over the years:

As a result of giving copywriting seminars, Bob has also gotten free trips to Germany, Poland, France, England, and Italy. An avid reader, one of his favorites was the dozens of free new hard-cover books he received for writing a marketing package for a book club. And he’s even been featured on CBS’s *Hard Copy* and the *National Enquirer* – also thanks to one of his books.

one or two brandies before writing. One famous ad man, I don't recall his name, liked to wear a conductor's cap when he wrote. Do you have any?

Nothing interesting – just two things. The first one is the same for 150 million Americans. I need to have my morning cup or two of coffee to get started. Yesterday, we were out of coffee filters and it was a terrible day. That's how dependant I am on it. The second thing is a little different – I frequently play music and I have this huge CD collection of music just to play while I write.

What kind of music do you listen to when you write?

I enjoy classical and rock, and to a lesser degree, jazz, and to a lesser degree still, some country. I'll even listen to rap – I like Eminem. Also, Yes, Del Shannon, Alien Ant Farm. There's nothing that Bruce Springsteen does that I don't like. And I love Jimmy Smith, the greatest jazz organist who ever lived. I'm also a big fan of trumpet players Maynard Ferguson and Doc Severinsen.

When do you write? Are you a morning person or a night owl?

I'm a "day" person. I used to start very early, but now I'd say my most productive time is between 8 a.m. and 2 p.m. I'll sometimes write beyond that or do other things until five or six – just because I'm used to a regular workday. But come evening, I'm done with it. I won't go back to the desk to write after 6 p.m. typically.

Are there any days where you just say, "Screw it – I'm taking the day off"?

You know what, I almost never do that, but I did it yesterday! I woke up and I was really not in the mood. I had two big projects I had yet to start and I was procrastinating – so I said, "You know what ... it's such a nice day..." So I ran errands and I had a book I wanted to read (I'm reading the book about Bernie Madoff – it's very good). So that's what I did.

Like a lot of writers, you say you're not overly social. You're on the record saying you don't like small talk. You don't like meetings. You don't like to travel. That suggests you're something of an introvert.

I am.



Bob on stage at AWAI's recent Bootcamp

Yet, when you come to Bootcamp, you're one of the funniest, most energetic, and popular speakers we have. How do you explain this? Does Bob Bly have a split personality?

To me, it's easier to talk and socialize at Bootcamp because I'm one of the speakers, so people come up to me – I don't have to go up to them. Where I'm uncomfortable is when my wife – she has a home-staging business – takes me to these networking meetings where everyone has to introduce themselves and talk about "stuff" ... and I just freeze to death. That kind of thing terrifies me!

You say also you rarely travel. Surely, you've taken a vacation in your day – where did you go last time you traveled?

I don't like traveling. Do you? I think the process of getting on an airplane since 9/11 has become so unpleasant that I try to avoid it. I'm not a fan of vacations, but because of my family, I do take them. The last place we all went was a resort called Atlantis. It was very nice.

If someone put a gun to your head and said, “Pack your bags, you must go on a vacation tonight,” where would you go?

I’ve seen pictures and videos of Ireland and Scotland, and the quiet and peacefulness of the countryside appeals to me. I wouldn’t want to go to Hong Kong, for instance – too metropolitan. And I’d like to visit Australia, too, because I have Australian clients and they’re very nice and I hear the countryside is beautiful.

Some worry that with so much media these days, people are being inundated with too many direct sales messages. Where do you stand on that?

That’s long been the case. But it’s also why you need to learn copywriting skills that will let you break through all that clutter. And that’s what I think AWAI does so well – which is why I’m a huge supporter of what you all do. If you want to be part of our profession – and it is a wonderful profession where the opportunities are *endless* – it behooves you to learn the higher-level skills that allow you to be better than 99% of the people writing what you see every day.

Speaking of which, what makes an ad great for you?

I really believe in Michael Masterson’s definition, which is “a great idea clearly expressed.” When I see a headline and a lead where instantly it’s a new and engaging idea and it’s written in a way that I “get it” and I want to read further – that’s a successful ad to me. I think a lot of people come up with interesting ideas that are convoluted in their expression and that’s where they lose out. Also key to success is having adequate proof in your copy to convince the reader that the claims you make are true.

My final question to you is this: If you were starting out as a copywriter today – unsure of where your true skill sets lie ... what “niche”

of the industry would you explore first ... and why?

Here’s what I did and maybe it’s not a bad way to start today. I worked for a year without any specialty or niche per se. And after a year, I piled all the copy I had written into categories. And I looked at the stack that was the biggest and decided that was going to be my specialty. Obviously, I enjoy it ... I have a lot of samples ... and I have a client list.

And what if someone can’t wait a year?

There’s another thing you can do. You want to do a self-evaluation – and I have a checklist for this in my book *How to Write and Sell Simple Information for Fun and Profit*. You want to ask yourself five things: What do I know... what do I like... what am I interested in... what do I have an aptitude for... and what excites me? And when you answer those questions, you’re going to come up with a list of items.

Then you have to go through that list and find something people are willing to pay for. Aristotle said words to the effect, “Where your interests intersect with the needs of the public, therein lies your vocation.” So you go through that list and you look for something you can use. Maybe there’s “Peruvian poetry” on your list. You know nobody is going to pay you for that. But maybe “pet care” is on the list too – someone will pay you for that.

Pam Foster, an AWAI student we both know, specializes in writing copy for clients in the pet care industry. Her passion – animals – intersected with an industry willing to pay enough good money that she could make a specialty of it. And now she’s a successful writer.

Good advice, Bob. Thanks for speaking with us today.

It is my pleasure always.