**f you can get people to spend more time reading your direct mail, you’re likely to generate more response**

One of the most eye-opening things I’ve learned during my 25-year career of writing direct mail copy is that people don’t read every word I write—even those who truly are interested in what I’m selling. And they certainly don’t read it from start to finish.

Instead, most people scan copy, looking for reasons either to keep reading … or toss it. Even those who ultimately respond spend less than three or four minutes reading the copy it took you (or your writer) days or weeks to create.

This means that to write effective direct mail copy, you have to be more than just a direct mail copywriter. You also must be a marketing strategist, behavioral psychologist, sales person and traffic cop.

So whether you’re the writer or approving manager, remember there’s a good deal more to writing successful direct mail copy than stringing words together and plopping in punctuation. To get more of your copy read, learn the rules so you’ll know when and how to break them.

Here are some proven tips for getting people to read more of your direct mail copy:

• State your major benefit in the opening sentence, then restate it two or three more times in various hot spots. You never know which part of a letter or brochure will be read first.

• Repeat your major benefit several times—in text copy, photo captions, charts and graphs, bullets, testimonials, headlines, subheads, call-outs and bursts, the Johnson Box, P.S., or closing sentence. Don’t assume it is seen or fully understood the first time.

• Use sidebar testimonial copy and put it in quotation marks to make it stand out. We all love to read what “real people” have to say. We find it reassuring that an objective third-party feels as strongly about a product or service as the company selling it.

There are endless marketing tools and techniques available to you today. But despite all the innovations, the simple [sales letter](http://www.targetmarketingmag.com/article/the-14-step-formula-writing-perfect-direct-mail-sales-letter/all/9%20Ways%20To%20Write%20a%20Better%20Sales%20Letter) still packs a powerful punch.

It's a direct and highly personal form of communication. It's not cluttered with graphics, which can disrupt reading a well-constructed sales argument. And it's an ideal way to present a strong offer.

Every sales letter is a little different, depending on your particular audience and the product or service you're selling. However, there are a few basic elements you should consider:

**1. Consider using a headline or Johnson Box.** Not every letter will have these elements, but they are ideal for telegraphing your offer or a clear benefit statement. Just remember that they make your letter look less personal and more like advertising.

**2. Use an appropriate salutation.** Personalization is best when you can do it. Otherwise, use a salutation that connects with the reader as closely as possible. "Dear Friend" is safe but general. "Dear Cat Lover" is more targeted and specific. If you're mailing to a business audience, use the occupational or professional title.

**3. Make your first sentence short and attention-grabbing.** You must instantly involve the reader. Make a startling statement. Hit an emotional hot button. Or just state the offer and get to the point. This last approach is often the best tactic and offers the least room for error. Subsequent sentences should expand on this first sentence to pull the reader into the body copy.

**4. Present your offer on page one.** If you don't give your offer in the headline or first sentence, you should put it somewhere on page one. Be clear and specific about what your reader will get by responding.

**5. End the first page in mid-sentence.** Whether it's curiosity or an urge for "closure," cutting a sentence in two at the bottom of a page helps encourage the reader to flip the page and finish the sentence—and, you hope, keep reading. You can also use this technique on successive pages where the reader must turn the page or go to a separate sheet.

**6. Keep your copy on track.** You're not writing a novel, but your main idea should be a thread that weaves through the whole letter. At minimum, present your theme on page one and end on a similar note on the last page.

**7. Make the body of the letter work hard.** If you've grabbed your reader's attention and generated interest in your offer, follow immediately with benefits, details, word pictures, testimonials and proofs to eliminate doubt.

**8. Call for action.** Quickly restate the main points of your offer and ask for the response you want—clearly and directly. Restate information on involvement devices, motivators, incentives, etc. Restate the big benefit.

**9. Make response easy and clear.** How should the reader respond? Give your toll-free number. Explain the ordering process one-two-three.

**10. Guarantee your offer.** Assure the reader that there is no risk. State your guarantee in strong terms. This should directly follow your call to action.

**11. Stress urgency.** Why should the reader respond now? Is it a limited-time offer? Are supplies limited? Are prices going up soon? Give a logical, sensible, honest reason why this is the best time to respond. And be clear about what will happen if the reader does not respond—the lost opportunity, the consequences.

**12. End the letter when you're finished.** Just as you shouldn't have a long wind up at the beginning of a letter, you shouldn't prattle on at the end. End a letter as bluntly as you began it. Often this is a quick restatement of your instructions for responding or a simple "thank you."

**13. Have the right person sign your letter.**Your letter should be signed by the highest authority person available or by someone relevant to the reader. Ideally, the signature should be in blue ink. (Hint: Consider how the signature looks. Does it suggest confidence and believability, or is it shaky and uncertain?)

**14. Use your P.S. effectively.**The postscript is one of the most-read parts of a letter. It should present an important message, a prime benefit, a restatement of the offer, a reminder of the deadline, a sweetener, or whatever you feel is most effective in this prime spot. Some call the P.S. a headline at the end of the letter. Ideally, it should be shor—one to three lines long.

**Improvising**  
These 14 sales letter elements are not commandments. There are occasions where you need to bend the rules a little.

I don't always use a headline. If I'm telling a story, I may not mention the offer on page one. In some letters, I've omitted the P.S. In others, I've included as many as 5 P.S.s (in an offbeat direct mail package for a Monty Python game). I've even created a letter or two without a signature (for official-looking communications).

Writing sales letters is a craft, often rising to the level of art form. But whatever your skill level, you should at least consider these 14 elements when writing any sales letter. If you choose to bend or break the rules, make sure you have a good reason.