



For Writers Only: Secrets to Improving Engagement on Your Content Using Word Pictures (and I Don't Mean Wordle)

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"Picture it."

If you're of a certain generation, those two words can only conjure images of tiny, white-haired Sophia from the *Golden Girls* about to tell one of her engaging (if somewhat long and irrelevant) stories as she holds her elderly roommates hostage in the kitchen or living room of their pastel-hued Miami home.

Even if you have no idea what I'm talking about, those words should become your writing mantra, because what readers do with your words is take all those letters and turn them into mind pictures. And as the writer, you have control over what those pictures look like and how long your readers mull them over.

According to *Reading in the Brain* by Stanislas Dehaene, reading involves a rich back and forth between the language areas and visual areas of our brains. Although the full extent of

that connectivity is not yet known, it's easy to imagine that the more sensory (interesting) information we can include in our writing, the more fully we can engage our readers.

So if you're a writer or content marketer you should be harnessing the illustrative power of words to occupy your readers' minds and keep them interested until they're ready to convert. Here's how to make your words *work* for you.

Kill clichés

I could have titled this piece "Painting a Picture with Words" but you've heard it. Over and over and over. And I'm going to propose that every time you use a cliché, a puppy dies.



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While that's a bit extreme (at least I hope so because that's a lot of dead puppies and Rocky's having second thoughts about his choice of parents), I hope it will remind you to read over what you've written and see where your attention starts to wander (wandering attention=cliché=one more tragic, senseless death) you get bored. Chances are it's right in

the middle of a tired bit of language that used to be a wonderful word picture but has been used and abused to the point that we readers can't even summon the image anymore.

Make up metaphors (and similes)

Did you know that most clichés used to be metaphors? And that we overused them because metaphors are possibly the most powerful tool we have at our disposal for creating word pictures (and, thus, engaging content)? You do now.



Creative metaphors turn heads

By making unexpected comparisons, metaphors and similes force words to perform like a stage mom on a reality show. These comparisons shake our brains awake and force us to pay attention. So apply a whip to your language. Make it dance like a ballerina in a little pink tutu. Give our brains something interesting to sink our teeth into (poor Rocky!), gnaw on, and share with our friends.

Engage the senses



If the goal of all this attention to language is to turn reading into a full brain experience, why not make it a little easier by including sensory information in whatever you're writing? Here are a few examples:

- These tickets are selling so fast we can smell the burning rubber.
- Next to a crumbling cement pillar, our interview subject sits typing on his pristine MacBook Air.
- In a sea of (yelp!) never ending horde of black and gray umbrellas, this red cowboy hat will show the world you own your look.

- Black hat tactics left your SERPs stinking as bad as a garbage strike in late August? Let us help you clear the air by cleaning up those results.

See how those images and experiences continue to unfold and develop in your mind? You have the power to affect your readers the same way—to create an image so powerful it stays with them throughout their busy days. One note of caution, though, sensory information is so strong that you want to be careful when creating potentially negative associations (like that garbage strike stench in the final example).

[Leverage superlatives \(wisely\) and ditch hyperbole](#)

SUPERLATIVES ARE THE MOST EFFECTIVEST TOOL YOU CAN USE *EVER* (until you wear your reader out or lose their trust). Superlatives (think "best," "worst," "hairiest" – any form of the adjective or adverb that is the most exaggerated form of the word) are one of the [main problems with clickbait headlines](#) (the other being the failure to deliver on those huge promises).



Superlatives should be earned

Speaking of exaggeration, be careful with it in all of its forms. You don't actually have to stop using it, but think of your reader's credence in your copy as a grasshopper handed over by a child. They think it's super special and they want you to as well. If you mistreat that grasshopper by piling exaggerated fact after exaggerated fact on top of it, the grasshopper will be crushed and your reader will not easily forgive you.

So how do you stand out in a crowded field of over-used superlatives and hyperbolic claims? Find the places your products honestly excel and tout those. At Moz we don't have the largest link index in the world. Instead, we have a really high quality link index. I could have obfuscated there and said we have "the best" link index, but by being specific about what we're actually awesome at, we end up attracting customers who want better results instead of more results (and they're happier for it).

Unearth the mystery



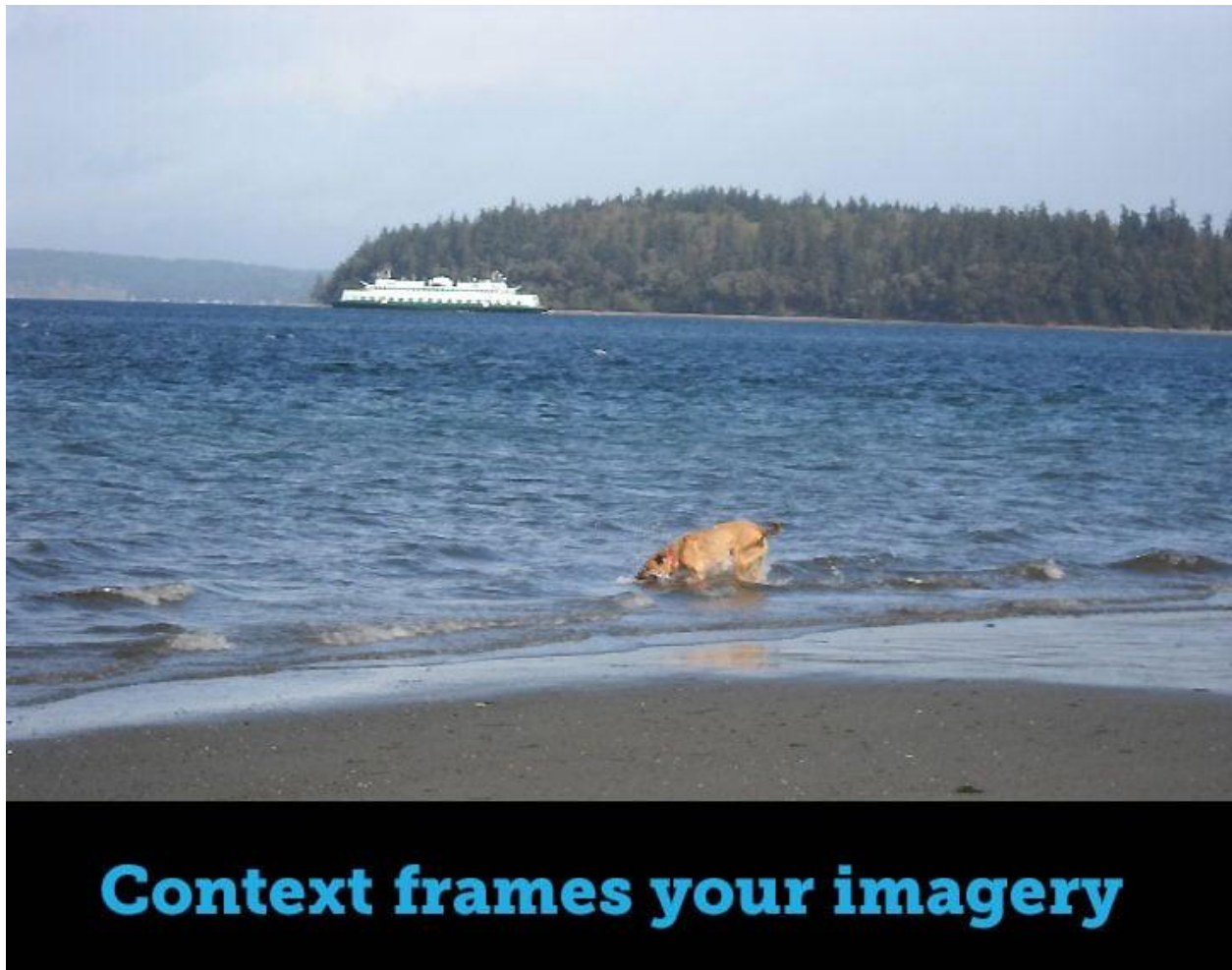
**A little mystery
improves any writing**

One of the keys to piquing your audience's interest is to tap into (poor puppy!) create or find the mystery in what you're writing. I'm not saying your product description will suddenly feature PIs in fedoras (I can dream, though), but figure out what's intriguing or new about what you're talking about. Here are some examples:

- Remember when shortcuts meant a few extra minutes to yourself after school? How will you spend the 15-30 minutes our email management system will save you? We won't tell...
- You don't need to understand how this toilet saves water while flushing so quietly it won't wake the baby, just enjoy a restful night's sleep (and lower water bills)
- Check out this interactive to see what makes our work boots more comfortable than all the rest.

Secrets, surprises, and inside information make readers hunger for more knowledge. Use that power to get your audience excited about the story you're about to tell them.

Don't forget the words around your imagery



Notice how some of these suggestions aren't about the word picture itself, they're about the frame around the picture? I firmly believe that a reader comes to a post with a certain

amount of energy. You can waste that energy by soothing them to sleep with boring imagery and clichés, while they try to find something to be interested in. Or you can give them energy by giving them word pictures they can get excited about.

So picture it. You've captured your reader's attention with imagery so engaging they'll remember you after they put down their phone, read their social streams (again), and check their email. They'll come back to your site to read your content again or to share that story they just can't shake.

Good writing isn't easy or fast, but it's worth the time and effort.



Let me help you make word pictures

Editing writing to make it better is actually one of my great pleasures in life, so I'm going to make you an offer here. Leave a sentence or two in the comments that you're having trouble activating, and I'll see what I can do to offer you some suggestions. Pick a cliché

you can't get out of your head or a metaphor that needs a little refresh. Give me a little context for the best possible results.

I'll do my best to help the first 50 questions or so (I have to stop somewhere or I'll never write the next blog post in this series), so ask away. I promise no puppies will get hurt in the process. In fact, Rocky's quite happy to be the poster boy for this post—it's the first time we've let him have beach day, ferry day, and all the other spoilings all at once.

The author's views are entirely their own (excluding the unlikely event of hypnosis) and may not always reflect the views of Moz.

Written by

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Isla uses her MFA in creative writing to organize words into forms that resonate with an audience and incite action. She co-authored [Clear Out the Static in Your Attic: A Writer's Guide for Turning Artifacts into Art](#). Connect with her on [Twitter](#).