



Just Right Sound Effects (or WWGD?)

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A few years ago, my first play somehow found its way to the New York Theater Festival, where it had an incredible run thanks to a relentless producer and a brilliant director. However, along the way, my script presented a few challenges, including an errant sound effect that prompted the confused director to call me a few days into rehearsals.

“I thought maybe it was just me, but I asked the actors and the stage manager, and even my friend, and they’re all equally confused,” he said. “There’s a sound effect just before the closing scene that says ‘bright sunlight.’ What does ‘bright sunlight’ sound like?”

I hadn’t closely reviewed the script for a few months, and by the time he called, I had forgotten what I even meant. Such is the conundrum of sound effects. While at the time of writing, we might know exactly what we have in mind, to others (or even to ourselves at a later time) reading it, they are less likely to know our inner thoughts.

Sound effects play a crucial role in advertising. They can evoke emotions, establish brand identity, identify time and location in the mind’s eye, and even shape a consumer’s perception of the product. Especially in radio and audio ads, sound effects are essential to ‘world-building,’ providing specific cues to the audience.

Before your ad reaches the audience, it goes through an editor and then off to a production team. And they rely on your words and instructions on how to proceed. If your sound effects lack specificity or, conversely, are too specific (more on this shortly), the editor and production team may struggle to understand your intent, and, much like my director, the sound effects may confuse rather than enhance the ad.

The production side of advertising operates on a tight schedule, and the less guesswork they have to do, the better. So, what can we do to make our sound effects sound, well, more effective?

ENTER GOLDBLOCKS AND THE THREE REPAIRS

Write Label receives a lot of briefs from mechanics and other auto repair businesses. Let’s use a fictional one as an example, “Wacky Wally’s Car Hospital.” The copy points are generic, and the AE hasn’t provided many clues as to what they want, so your creativity is key. You decide to set the ad

within the garage of Wacky Wally's, and to create an atmosphere to signal to the listener that car repairs are taking place.

Here are three examples of sound effects you might use:

SFX – A mysterious blend of ethereal whispers and echoing riddles.

SFX – The distinctive sound of a 1957 Chevy Bel Air revving.

SFX – The satisfying clank of tools (think wrench tightening, drill drilling, etc.).

In the first, though you might know precisely what you meant by “etereal whispers and echoing riddles,” the production team is less likely to grasp your intent. They will be left scratching their collective head, wondering what, in Wacky Wally's name, you meant. And since they're on a tight deadline, they'll be forced to go with whatever interpretation they come up with, which could alter the atmosphere you were trying to build.

In the second, we are faced with the opposite issue. Whereas in the first example, the cue suffered from being too abstract, this one is too specific. If your sound effect is so esoteric that only an initiated few will understand it, it probably is too specific for the production team to replicate.

This brings us to the third example, which, like our girl Goldilocks discovered, is just right. Here, the description is specific enough for the production team to replicate but not specific enough that they will have to take time out of their day to go down a ‘rabbit hole’ searching for a sound that, if we're being honest, most people wouldn't be able to differentiate from a generic car engine revving in the first place.

WWGD?

So what did I do when the director called? His question was a good one. What does bright sunlight sound like? We all know that sunlight doesn't make a sound, so including “bright sunlight” as a sound effect provided no guidance. If he hadn't asked, he would've had to infer, which might have changed the tone I was trying to set in the first place.

After thinking about it and considering the mood I was trying to convey when writing it, I changed the sound effect to “Bright sunlight: high-pitched notes, perhaps crisp and clear like a wind chime.” And when I saw my play on the stage a few weeks later, that's precisely the sound that was produced. My intent remained intact and the director and stage manager didn't need to scramble in the figurative dark trying to glean what bright sunlight sounds like.

So, too, with your copy. Not just with sound effects, but with all elements you write for production, consider how it will read and sound to others. If you apply the ‘Goldilocks and the Three Repairs’ principle to your copy, everyone involved will benefit.

HOW TO FIND ‘JUST RIGHT’

Incorporating ‘just right’ sound effects isn’t difficult. As you develop your copy, you’ll know the sounds needed to enhance the tone. Don’t overthink it. Simply consider what someone reading your script for the first time might be thinking. Would they, without insight beyond what they are reading on the screen, be able to decipher your choices, and, during production, would they be able to easily replicate the sound from your description?

According to a recent YouGov poll, over a third of Americans use subtitles when watching TV. That number soars dramatically for adults under 30 years old, 63% of whom prefer subtitles when watching television. If you’re one of those people who uses subtitles, start paying attention to how sound effects are described. You’ll usually discover that the sound effects are ‘to the bone’ — clean descriptions, sans ornate language, easy to understand even if the sound is off.

Another way to consider effective sound effects is to modify a writing exercise I used to do with my students. At the beginning of class, I would tell them to put their phones in their pockets and follow me. We’d walk somewhere familiar (often the school’s main reading room in the library), and I would instruct them to observe everything they see, hear, and smell. When we returned to class, I would tell them to write for ten minutes about all they observed with one caveat: they couldn’t use any visual descriptors and instead had to rely on only audio. Since they were deprived of all but one of their most potent senses, they were forced to rely exclusively on sound to convey their experience.

Finally, as a point of personal privilege: as a Write Label editor, one of my jobs is to strengthen your copy. If something like a sound effect is too specific or too abstract and we are forced either to guess at your intent or flag the submission, the likelihood that it will be featured is reduced significantly. From your words to your music beds to your sound effects, always strive for that perfect sweet spot in the middle that’s ‘just right.’

In the end, always ask yourself: What Would Goldilocks Do?