

HOW TO WRITE BEAUTIFUL CLICKBAIT

I first took the “Word Generator” position because it was a full-time job technically in writing. I soon learned I did not like writing as much as I thought, at least not at this speed. It was stipulated in my contract that I create twelve articles per day, spread out over fifteen slides, at three to four sentences each. I produced nearly five thousand words a day, an output that induced a manic stream of consciousness.

With our laptops placed on long rows of metallic tables, my coworkers and I faced each other but rarely made eye contact. What bothered me most about my job, physically at least, was enduring the uncomfortable seating eight hours a day. The stools had no back, and were made from fabric that chafed my legs in the summer. They were also fastened to the floor, frustratingly far from the table.

“Movie Stars Who Used to Turn Tricks,” my assignment before our 9:00 AM meeting. Aside from the obvious ethical breaches of writing this article, I was having a hard time finding enough former sex workers. Older celebrities didn’t count, because my boss Keith said our demographic wouldn’t care about them and besides pretty much all of Old Hollywood got started that way. A-list actors I couldn’t confirm were off limits because he didn’t need that kind of lawsuit. I spent twenty minutes reading fringe forums alleging nearly every famous actress had worked at an escort agency or once had a sugar daddy. I didn’t want to slander anyone, nor did I want to fall behind, so I widened the definition of “turning tricks.” I found three call girls turned actresses, four former strippers, two gigolos, two erotic body rub givers, and a financial dominatrix, and decided that was enough. The last two slides could be personal reflections, to soften the vulgarity, like those speeches Jerry Springer gave at the end of each episode.

Before landing his famous role as the Don, he was a Don Juan. This actor had a reputation for servicing wealthy upper east side divorcees. "I was 20, I think of it as method acting experience," the Oscar-winning star reflected.

Some people would do anything for their craft! What do you think of these celebrities dabbling in the world's oldest profession?

Surprised? Disgusted? Tell us about it in the comments!

Grateful my name wasn't attached to this article, I still cringed at my words. My editor Gillian called us over for a meeting. She brought over the article schedule, which Keith scrawled out every morning by hand, and we gathered around her. She frowned, unable to read his handwriting, and said, "The Drawbacks of Having a Big Dong?"

"Who wants to do this?" she asked.

All of us had a mannerism we reverted to when we didn't want to be the one to take the story. Alexa swiveled her chair. Nicole tapped her pencil. I just sat there frozen and prayed someone would take responsibility for their bad idea.

"Who pitched this shit?" Gillian asked.

"I did, but I don't want to write it," David said. David had been there a year to my six months, and was given priority when we rationed out the pitches. David only picked stories when they fit into his deplorable niche, almost exclusively focused on celebrity wardrobe malfunctions.

Alexa, who was new, smacked her gum and agreed to write about the drawbacks of having a big dick.

“Thank you,” Gillian said. “Next is, ‘Why Children Hate Ugly People, According to Science.’”

“Mine!” David said.

“Let’s shorten that title. ‘Celebrities Who Have Herpes?’” She looked at Nicole, who usually took the celebrity gossip stories.

“How am I supposed to fact check that?” Nicole said, scowling.

“Google’s your best friend,” Gillian said.

“Are we talking oral or genital?”

“How about, as many genitals as you can find, and if you can’t get to fifteen— go for oral!”

“Got it,” Nicole snapped.

“Hold on. We can’t publish that. I don’t want to get sued,” the boss said, turning around in his leather swivel chair. He squinted his eyes for a few seconds and said, “Make it, ‘Celebrities who *Allegedly* Have Herpes.’”

I usually sat out the morning stories, which were more problematic than those scheduled for the afternoon, when traffic spiked. But if I didn’t accept those, I was left with fewer choices and sometimes ended up with last-minute pieces like “Butt Injection Nightmares and the People Who Live Them,” my 4:30 prize. These stories were often given as punishment to recent hires who would likely quit after two weeks. Those images of purplish deflated butt cheeks, like flesh that had been detonated, were enough to make most people walk out of this office in horror. I’d grown mostly immune to the content, but the workload still gave me anxiety dreams. Staying sane at this company meant negotiating a balance between crafting sentences I wasn’t too ashamed of and finishing my work before five.

I learned quickly to write fast. I gave up my flowery, meandering style for a language based on economy. Imperative sentences and hashtags were effective, because they technically counted as complete sentences. Search engines banned websites that didn't have three sentences per page, and promoted ones with greater word variation.

After our meeting I took an Adderall and got to work. I was determined to stay efficient. I didn't want to have to work overtime to finish my articles. It was Friday. I had plans. Plans that involved an open bar. And I was in a decent mood because I'd just had a promising interview for a position at a real newspaper. For some reason, they were really impressed with my writing samples. They were starting a new vertical. They didn't go into exactly what this new vertical was, but I was ecstatic at the thought of getting out of here.

I began on my next assignment: "Most Hated Celebrity Couples" (have to be currently together). I could get through this mindlessly enough.

These two creeps top our list for most insufferable celebrity couple. Ugh. Between her shameless desire for fame and his weird crystal obsession, we just really wish they'd fall off a cliff!

She's hated for being a serial relationship poacher (stole two husbands!) and disguising her anorexia under the guise of always going on hunger strikes to show solidarity with the malnourished children of the world. Gag me with a spoon! The only thing she's starving for is attention.

I rationalized that I was still exercising some kind of writing muscle, buried deep beneath insipid superlatives and word count restraints. There was a sparse poetry to the language of clickbait, a talent in drafting titles that drew you in, creating a desire nobody wanted that could never be fulfilled.

“I need all the Word Generators to send me ten more pitches by tonight,” Keith said, slamming his hand on the table. “Our advertising goals are falling short. You all need to step it up with sexy, original content.”

It perplexed me that he took this place so seriously. He was always asking for more pitches, demanding content that lived up to his inscrutable definition of “original.” On the rare days he was out, we derided his Napoleon Complex and manner of puffing his chest out. I rationalized that the faster I worked, the shorter the day seemed. I’d just have to chug those sugary energy drinks and Adderall to get through today’s list of particularly sickening stories. Damn it, these idiots broke up! Can’t use them. I’ll just stick them in the back and say we’re very thrilled they split up because we couldn’t stand them and we delight in their heartbreak. *These ex-lovers were the worst! They made our eyes roll out of our skulls with their ridiculous mindfulness blog and weirdly sexual baby names. Who really names their child Lollipop?* That’s fifteen. No time to edit. What’s next on my list? *Why You’re Single Based on Your Zodiac*. At least I could shorten it to 12 slides.

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On my fifteen-minute lunch break, I took my sugary energy drink and meal to the roof for my brief respite of daylight. I used to be good and cook healthy meals for myself, but student loan repayments had inspired me to be loyal to a brand of ramen they sold at my corner deli. I put hot sauce in the soup and ate it from the Styrofoam cup, basking on a lawn chair someone had abandoned on the roof.

Evelyn, my friend whose job it was to find stock photos that correlated with the articles, met me up there. She wore men’s clothing and spiked those energy drinks with gin throughout the day.

“I’ve totally figured out a system,” she said. “I’ve got about a hundred folders that categorize most common stock photos needed for the articles. Stuff like ‘surprised woman,’ ‘man looking down at pants,’ ‘grossed-out woman,’ ‘embarrassed man,’ routine celebrities, you know... When I see the article headline, I just skim through it and apply the stock photos I’ve already saved in the folders, instead of having to search for a new photo for each slide.”

“Have fun with my butt injections article later,” I said. Our company wasn’t allowed to publish photos that were too graphic or infringed on anyone’s copyright.

“Those are some disturbing images.” She shook her head. “I’m thinking ‘worried woman’ or some stock medical images.”

“I don’t know about your standardization system,” I said. “I like the way you handled that article about babies getting cold sores from their parents with those cute photos of kids with chunky jelly on their faces.”

She laughed. “I don’t know why you still try to get any creative satisfaction from this job. I’ve been here three years. I leave my work at the door and do my own creative projects for myself on the side. Other employers know what I really do when I put ‘Art Director’ next to this company’s name on my resume. Yeah, it’s sort of in a creative field, but come on, you’re just a Word Generator. You aren’t Dickens. It’s your job to literally shit out words.”

“Dickens shit out words, too, with those serialized novels. Why do you think his books were so long? He got paid by the word.”

“No, he got paid by installments. Pretty well, too.”

“I’m not delusional. I know I’m a clickbait serf,” I said. “But I’m hopeful about my interview.”

“I really do hope you get it. Sounds fancy,” she said dryly, taking another swig. She was sweating and looking at her closely, I realized her teeth looked kind of yellow. “You know, at least if I stay here, there’s never any confusion between my art and my work. I can keep them separate.”

“So when are you putting out that photography zine?” I asked.

“It’s coming along, okay?” She lit a cigarette. “It’s not one of your goddamn ‘Celebrities with Cellulite’ slideshows.”

“It was just a question,” I said. I looked at my phone. “Shit, I’m late. I have to get back.” My shoes clacked as I ran down the four flights of stairs to my office.

“You took an eighteen-minute lunch break,” Keith said to me when I returned. It was the first time he’d addressed me in weeks. He might not have noticed the couple extra minutes I took had I not been panting like a recently escaped criminal.

“Sorry,” I said. He continued to stare at me, I think, expecting me to apologize profusely.

“Look, I’m not Mussolini. But look around. Most of the other word generators eat at their desks.” He motioned to the rest of the team shoveling soggy salads from the company’s cafeteria into their mouths while typing.

“It won’t happen again,” I said.

“Glad to hear it, Anna,” he said. I didn’t bother telling him wasn’t my name. I had to ream through these next eight stories if I wanted to make it out on time, and my Adderall high was already fading.

I looked inside the refrigerator for another one of their sugary energy drinks. I hated the chemical taste of those drinks, but guzzled another one down anyway. It gave me the confidence

to glide through the next two stories: ‘Love Bites: Louisiana Woman Marries Alligator’ and ‘Man Kills Wife and Sells Her Skeleton as Jewelry Online.’ Tiana usually took the bizarre news stories, but she was out sick today. I didn’t have a niche because I disliked all the content equally and told myself I wasn’t going to work here that long. I thought it would make it appear as though I had “range” as an employee and was “taking one for the team” by not being too picky, but nobody else seemed to notice my behavior.

“Remember those ten pitches!” Keith shouted. “Your stories aren’t performing as well as they should be. Step it up!”

The writers groaned collectively. I had already gleaned every tabloid and fringe publication I knew of yesterday. But I’d worry about that after I finished my articles. I still had ‘Celebrities with Strange Obsessions’ and ‘Most Shocking Objects Doctors Found in People’s Butts’ to finish. The celebrity obsessions couldn’t be drugs or sexual fetishes, either. But I found a list another website had already put together. I could just scramble the order and put a couple new ones in.

This teenage heartthrob has some odd dietary habits. He drinks 500 cans of diet soda a week and only eats cereal. Where is his mother?

“Did we already do ‘The Drawbacks of Having a Big Dong?’” the Boss asked.

No time to reply. I wasn’t going to be the one to look that up. Big dongs weren’t my problem. They were Alexa’s. There are only so many censor-friendly ways to write those silly sex articles. I’d have to search for every penis euphemism: *Dangers to Having a Big Member*, *Downsides to Having a Huge Wang*. This could go on forever. Nobody’s saying anything. He’s going to have a fit. Hope it’s not on me.

Sources tell us this beloved pop star used to have a problem with excessively washing her hands. It got so bad they started to swell and peel, and she had to cancel a concert because she couldn't hold a microphone. Yikes!

Then she found a new strange obsession— compulsively brushing her teeth. If she doesn't do it twelve times a day, she says she feels "gross." But it's totally destroying her enamel!

“Did we already do ‘Drawbacks of Having a Big Dong’” the boss asked again, slightly more irritated.

Fine. I'll just search for it. Can't take too long. But it might be under a different title. Better just say it's new so we don't have to do more pitches.

“We never wrote it!” I shouted.

“Thanks,” he shouted.

“So what *are* some of ‘The Drawbacks of Having a Big Dong’” he asked after a minute. Jesus. Couldn't he search these things himself? Guess I understand his complex now. I took another half of an Adderall pill and noticed David staring at me. David was good looking but dressed like a dad from the Midwest. I wished he would stop gawking at me and get back to writing about actresses who've aged poorly.

I looked up and saw the boss coming over in my direction. I gave David my death stare, hoping he wouldn't tattle. I hated sitting next to him. He was always trying to get in with the boss, asking him about those cross-eyed children of his. Whew, the boss decided to yell at Alexa.

“And can someone fill me in on this dong article?” the Boss asked.

‘Disgusting Things Lurking in Your Home’ flashed up on my email. Gillian says it's a last minute assignment and can I please do this one first? I'm the best. Thanks. Another article? I

was never going to leave. What did Gillian even mean by this? Her sensationalist pop-science articles were always so vague. I messaged her and asked what some of the disgusting things lurking in my home were. She sent me a link with a long list of very gross things... mites, bacteria, toxic allergens, dead skin...can't wait to curl up in bed tonight! I oozed some antibacterial gel over my hands and forearms.

Don't feel bad about being single and sleeping alone. You're actually in the company of 2.5 million dust mites! According to experts, this is the average number of tiny little mites sharing your bed each night.

Love the plush feeling of walking around on your carpet barefoot? You're basically stepping in a field of bacteria! There are 5,000 times more bacteria in your carpet than in your toilet. Yuck! Experts recommend you vacuum once a week.

Keith stomped over in our direction, puffing his chest out like a bantam. He looked mad. I sat up straight as he hovered above our table.

“Word generators! Look, I just want to know what is so bad about having a big dong. Are there really fifteen reasons? I don't want us to look stupid on the internet. Why wouldn't someone want a big dong? Alexa?”

“Um, because girls complain it hurts them, it sticks out of tight pants, you can't do as many positions. Let's see...” Alexa scrolled through her phone.

“You can't ever really be like, balls deep in a girl.” David said.

“Like you would know,” Alexa muttered.

“I actually would know quite well,” David said.

“Quiet! I feel like I'm dealing with children!” Keith screamed.

“Look I don’t want to be the bad guy. I’m not a fascist boss man. I’m a cool boss man. You don’t have to like me but you have to respect me. Don’t fucking ignore me. If I ask you a question, I need you to answer me. Be on time. Don’t take a billion cigarette breaks. Do you have any idea how lucky you guys are? You get to come to work and wear what you want, generate content about topics that are incredibly fun— pop culture, fringe news, sex tips...” He looked at Alexa. “You want to go back to copywriting for that carpet company?” He glanced around the room as though he were searching for somebody. “You want to go back to producing jingles about enemas? I don’t remember which of you had that on your resume.” He guffawed. “You know, you’re all replaceable. If you have a problem with the content of these articles, you can quit.”

Suddenly, my phone rang from a number I didn’t recognize. Everyone paused to stare at me, scolding me for not putting it on vibrate. I fumbled around in the recesses of my purse trying to find it. When I took it out of the cluttered mess, my boss was standing over me with crossed arms and a smug smile.

“Well, Anna, answer the damn thing! It’s obviously way more important than your job, which you let everyone know you think is so beneath you.”

I silenced it. “Sorry.”

“Answer it! You all just do whatever the fuck you want anyway! Stroll in twenty minutes late wearing your hoochie outfits. Alexa’s got her nipples practically hanging out. I can’t even get a simple response from my employees. Just go answer it Anna!”

I ran out into the hallway to take the call, eager to remove myself from the room. It was probably a sales call or a debt collector that had just cost me my job.

“Hello?” I said warily. I was anxious until I heard the voice on the other end. It was Mara, the lady from the newspaper, congratulating me on my new job. When could I start?

“Tomorrow,” I said.

I knew most jobs required you to give two weeks’ notice, but here it was typical for employees to storm out at noon, yelling “I can’t take this anymore!” after an overwhelming day. I didn’t expect I could use him as a reference anyway. I walked back in the office and told Mara, “see you at eight.”

“Hot date, Anna?” Keith asked when I hung up.

“My name’s not Anna,” I said. “I quit.”

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That night I drank a glass of champagne in my bathtub and imagined how fancy my future would be at my new job—travelling for assignment trips, having real healthcare, meeting other journalists. I would never have to research which celebrities had foot fetishes unless I wanted to, which I didn’t. I would never accept verbal abuse at a job because I couldn’t write about the worst aspects of human curiosity fast enough. I could tell people where I worked and nobody would laugh or say something condescending.

I crawled into bed early but I was a little restless so I took some Trazodone to help me sleep. When I awoke I leapt up immediately and made myself an omelet, imagining how prepared and organized I would be now that I didn’t hate my job. I left for work early enough to stop for coffee across the street and collect my thoughts before heading into the office at 7:45 A.M.

Mara grinned as I walked in the door. She had such a bright, symmetrical smile. She could’ve been in a toothpaste commercial or something with those teeth. She probably had a

great dental plan working here.

“Hello,” she said. “Thank you for coming in early. How was your commute?”

“It was fine,” I said.

She nodded and bared her perfect teeth again as she handed me a leather-bound folder.

“Excellent. So here’s our style guide and company policies. We’re going to start you off with a couple short posts per day for now, just so you can get a sense of our style and pace here.”

I leafed through the folder; everything in there seemed pretty standard. They didn’t use Oxford commas. Split infinitives were undesirable but acceptable. There was an HR department here, unlike at my last job. They had organic snacks in the kitchen and beer on Fridays.

“Now that we’ve gone through the basics, I want to talk about our new vertical you’ll be writing for. It’s designed to rev up our advertising and bring traffic to the site.” There was a hard knock at the door.

“Hold on. That must be the other writer.”

She got up and opened the office door, and a young man walked in. He looked kind of like David but more put together.

“I’ll just go through this for both of you,” she said, handing him an identical leather-bound folder. “The aim of our new vertical is to get people to our site with thrilling and seductive— though tasteful— content in hopes they will find their way to some of our more serious articles. Our demographic is professional women aged 45-60 who may look to this site accidentally while at work and find themselves so entranced by the content that they can’t stop reading. The articles will be split up into 4 or 5 slides. Our main topics are Relationships, Health, Travel, and Mom Life.”

She handed us each a list of examples of titles we’d ideally pitch to them:

These Everyday Toxins May Be Giving Your Child Cancer

Things I Wish I'd Known About My Teeth

Meet the MILF Who Funded Her Son's College Degree Through Sex Work

12 Rainforests That Will Disappear in Your Lifetime

“We’re aiming for you guys to write eight of these a day, though we’re still experimenting with the amount of content we’ll need for the site to be profitable with our advertisers. Print is a dying medium, you know, so we’re hoping this web vertical will augment our budget for our newspaper.”

I looked over her sample list of pitches and wondered why my expectations for this place had been so off.

“Is this the conference room?” I asked, looking out the window at the landscape of uneven rooftops.

“No, this is the office you guys will be sharing. We have two other writers coming.”

“The chairs are really nice,” I said, smoothing my hand over the soft leather of the plush chair I was sitting on. She looked at me, unsure of what to do with my comment.

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