proof before poetry.



01 / FIELD GUIDE

Find the promise inside the line

A line can be attractive and still promise more than anyone has established. “Never miss a booking” sounds like a simple product benefit. It also suggests a dependable outcome across many situations: weak connections, missed notifications, staff mistakes and service interruptions. Before polishing its rhythm, ask what would have to be true for someone to rely on it.

This guide is about editorial craft: identifying claims, checking their support and writing within what is known. It does not provide legal clearance or replace relevant specialist review. The purpose is to help that review begin with clear questions instead of a beautifully formatted collection of assumptions.

Our invented teaching case is RosterNote, software that helps a small team handle appointment requests. The draft headline says “Never miss a booking.” Supporting copy promises “Half the admin. Happier customers. Every request, automatically handled.” No outcome study or reliability record has been supplied. The available material is a proposed product specification and a demonstration of its request screen.

> FIRST PASS
>
> Underline every statement about what the product does, what happens afterwards and what the reader might reasonably infer.

Do not begin by searching for a softer adjective that makes the same unsupported idea harder to notice. First decide which promise can survive a clear account of the evidence.

02 / FIELD GUIDE

Separate capability from consequence

A capability is something the product can do under described conditions. A consequence is something that happens for a person or organisation as a result. The first may contribute to the second without establishing it. A shared request list can make work easier to organise; that alone does not prove fewer missed bookings, happier customers or a particular reduction in administrative time.

For the invented RosterNote example, assume the specification says staff can filter requests as pending or confirmed. A staff member chooses when to confirm a request. Notifications require the relevant account setting and a working connection. A demonstration shows those controls operating in one configured account. These are the fictional inputs for the exercise, not facts about an existing product.

Record what each input establishes and what it leaves open. A specification describes intended functionality. A demonstration shows particular behaviour in a particular setup. Neither, by itself, establishes reliability in all conditions, comparative speed against another product or an effect on customer satisfaction. A testimonial would be one person’s account, not a universal performance measure.

+ Capability: staff can view and change request status.
+ Condition: the workflow still requires a person to confirm.
+ Unestablished consequence: no booking is ever missed.
+ Missing evidence: time saved, error rates and customer outcomes.

The distinction makes the next writing decision precise: explain the useful capability while leaving unsupported consequences out.

03 / FIELD GUIDE

Read the evidence closely

Evidence has a shape. Identify who produced it, what was observed, which version and setting were involved, when it was collected and what question it was designed to answer. A relevant source can still be too narrow for the proposed wording. Keep the actual finding beside the claim rather than relying on a slide headed “research”.

If a report contains numbers, preserve the denominator, time period, comparison and conditions. Do not change a proportion of trial participants into a proportion of all users. Do not present a maximum as a typical result or an average as a guarantee for each customer. If those details are missing, ask the owner for them before publishing a precise-sounding claim.

Check the distance between the evidence and the execution. A test of one material does not automatically establish the performance of the finished product. An observed association does not, on its own, show that a feature caused an outcome. A result from a previous version may need renewed review after the product changes.

> WORKING TEST
>
> Could the evidence owner point to the exact observation that supports this exact sentence? If not, mark the gap instead of treating confidence as proof.

This is not an instruction to distrust every statement. It is a way to locate the boundary between what is supportable now, what needs a narrower sentence and what needs more work.

04 / FIELD GUIDE

Make a claim-by-claim decision

Return to the proposed RosterNote page. The following is a completed editorial review of the invented evidence packet. It makes decisions about this draft, not general rules that a particular phrase can never be used.

+ “Never miss a booking.” Remove. The supplied controls do not establish an absence of missed bookings across users or operating conditions.
+ “Half the admin.” Remove. No time comparison, defined task set or measurement method has been supplied. A neat fraction does not become evidence because it is memorable.
+ “Happier customers.” Remove from the factual promise. There is no customer-outcome evidence in the packet.
+ “Every request, automatically handled.” Rewrite. Requests are displayed, but a staff member still decides whether to confirm them.
+ “View pending and confirmed requests.” Keep provisionally. It matches the described feature; confirm the release version and final interface before use.

The last decision remains provisional because a fictional teaching packet cannot approve a real release. In a working review, attach the specification version, demonstration notes and named product owner. Record the final wording they are checking, including nearby images and button labels.

A screenshot can imply functionality too. Do not populate a screen with an automatic confirmation state the product cannot produce. The claim review belongs to the complete execution, including what the image appears to demonstrate.

05 / FIELD GUIDE

Write within the evidence

Here is a complete proposed replacement for the invented page. It sells an observable workflow rather than a result the supplied material cannot support. The product name and features remain fictional; this is an example of editorial reasoning, not an approved advertisement.

> REWRITTEN PAGE
>
> See the request. Make the decision.
> RosterNote brings pending and confirmed appointment requests into a shared team view. Filter by status, review the details and choose when to confirm.
> Your team stays in control of the decision. Notifications depend on your account settings and connection.
> Button: See the request workflow

The heading names two actions in their real order. The first paragraph describes the capability and preserves the human confirmation step. The supporting sentence places a relevant condition where it can inform the reader’s understanding. The button leads to a demonstration of the workflow rather than promising a result such as “Stop losing customers”.

The new version is less sweeping, but it gives the creative team something solid to express. Picture direction could show a request moving from pending to confirmed after a visible staff action. A plain explanation can still have rhythm, contrast and a useful visual sequence.

If the team later supplies appropriate evidence for a stronger outcome claim, reopen the review. The purpose is not to keep all copy permanently cautious. It is to make the strength and scope of the words travel with the strength and scope of their support.

06 / FIELD GUIDE

Practise narrowing a promise

Exercise: an invented commuter bag has a roll-top closure and welded seams. The only supplied evidence is a construction specification and photographs. A draft says “Ready for any weather. Everything inside stays dry.” Write a useful replacement and identify the unanswered question. Do not invent a water test, certification or customer experience.

> MODEL RESPONSE
>
> Headline: “Roll the top. Carry on.”
> Body: A commuter bag with a roll-top closure and welded seams. Explore the compartments, dimensions and care instructions before choosing your carry.
> Review note: Do not claim that contents stay dry in every condition. Request evidence about the finished bag’s water resistance, including closure method, exposure conditions and any exclusions.

The replacement names construction facts without turning them into an unlimited performance guarantee. Even “weatherproof” would need its own support; replacing an absolute sentence with a familiar adjective can preserve the same unsupported implication. Product photography should also avoid depicting immersion or severe weather unless that use is appropriately supported.

A reasonable alternative is to delay the weather-led execution until the relevant evidence arrives. It is not always necessary to force a claim into a publishable sentence immediately. If the intended idea depends on a capability nobody can yet establish, the honest creative choice may be a different idea.

The model response does not assert that the bag leaks or fails. Absence of supplied evidence is a limit on what this reviewer can responsibly approve, not proof of the opposite claim.

07 / FIELD GUIDE

The claim and its evidence

Use one sheet per claim, including the nearby image or demonstration. Assign unanswered questions to an owner; blank evidence is not approval.

Exact proposed words and the likely implied promise:

Source, owner, date and product version:

Exact finding or demonstrated capability:

Conditions, population, comparison and known limits:

Keep / narrow / remove / seek evidence - and why:

Final wording, remaining question and review owner:

Save the reviewed execution. Reopen the claim when the product, evidence or placement changes.

08 / FIELD GUIDE

Leave a usable review record

A good review ends with decisions and owners. Give the writer the approved scope, the designer any image constraints and the product owner the remaining evidence questions. Avoid vague feedback such as “make it safer” or “sounds strong”. Those comments push the next person towards guesswork and can produce a quieter version of the same unsupported promise.

Store the reviewed wording with its supporting materials and date. If several placements share a claim, identify which ones need changing together. A shortened version can accidentally drop the condition that made a longer version supportable. A new screenshot can suggest a feature that the written review never considered.

+ Specific language needs specific support, not merely a confident tone.
+ A product feature does not prove a customer outcome.
+ A relevant limitation may belong near the main claim.
+ Missing evidence is a question to resolve, not a result to invent.

This guide cannot determine every industry’s evidential or approval requirements. Use appropriate specialist review for the real product, territory and claim. Its practical contribution comes earlier: a writer should be able to explain what the sentence promises and where that promise comes from. Your next action is to take one live paragraph, underline its claims and complete the worksheet before changing a single adjective.

READING / PRACTICE / CONTEXT

Where the thinking starts

The methods, teaching scenarios, exercises and worksheets here are original synthesis. The books below inform particular decisions; their authors do not endorse this guide. Page references locate the supplied PDF editions and may differ from printed page numbers.

Robert W. Bly / The Copywriter's Handbook, fourth edition

PDF pp. 75-77, 88-90

Feature-benefit distinctions and discussion of supporting proof informed the claim review. Persuasive believability is not treated as substantiation.

Claude C. Hopkins / Scientific Advertising

PDF pp. 23-26

The argument for specific rather than vague claims prompted scrutiny of precise language. The guide rejects any assumption that specificity itself establishes truth.

Make the tools your own

Read the worked example, try the exercise before its model response, then use the worksheet on a real assignment. Print the worksheet at 100% or annotate a copy digitally. Check your actual product facts, audience context and production conditions before applying the advice.

THATCOPYADDICT / AHMED MOUSTAFA ELSHERIF / 2026