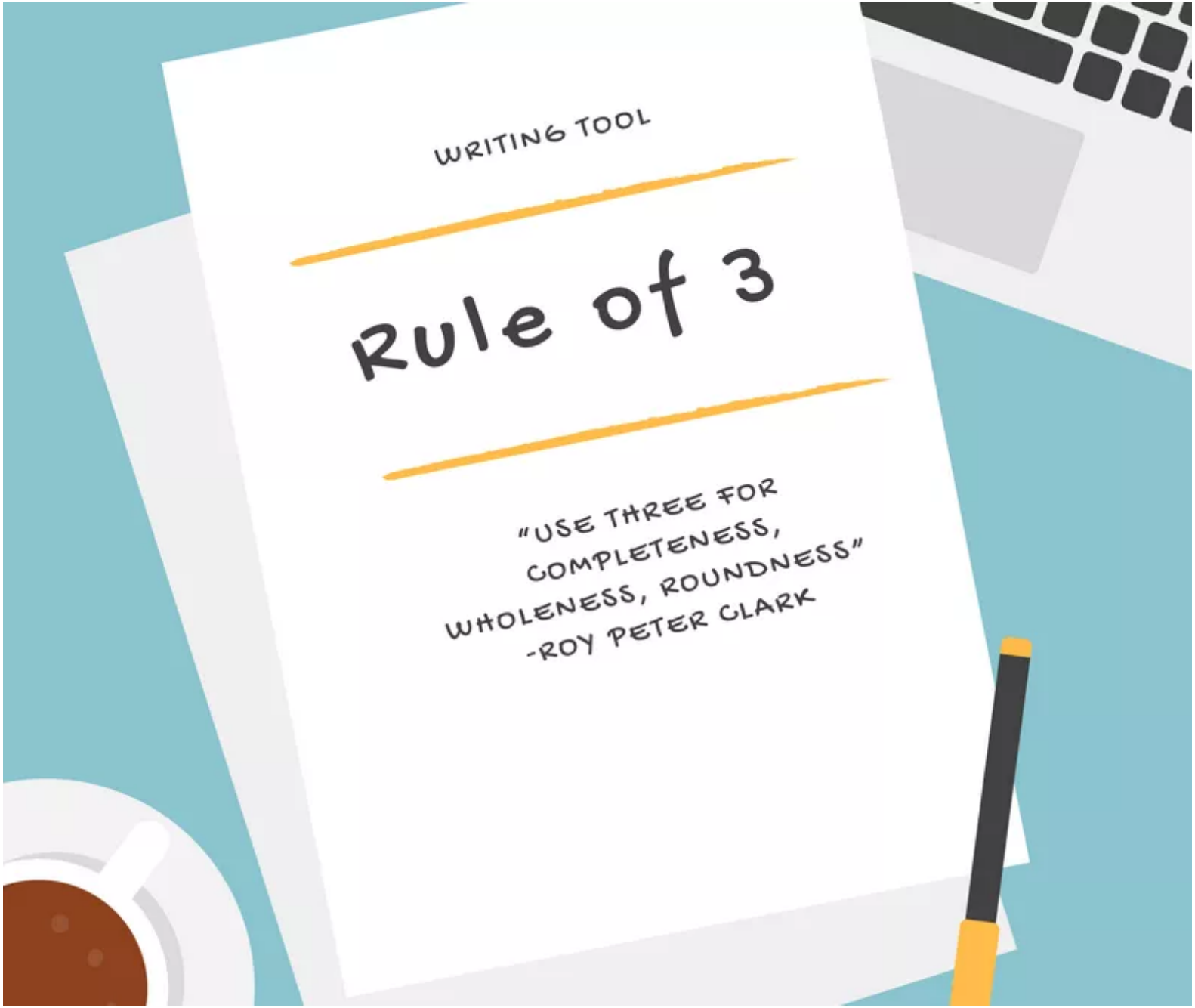
UberConvince

Rule of 3: Why Trios Makes Copy Memorable (According to Science)

by Chase | Jan 14, 2018 | General Psychology, Rhetorical Devices, Writing Techniques | 0 comments


WRITING TOOL
Rule of 3
"USE THREE FOR COMPLETENESS, WHOLENESS, ROUNDNESS"
-ROY PETER CLARK

The Rule of 3 is a writing principle that suggests that a trio of things is more likely to engage the reader and stick in their memories.

But is this true? Or is it all just mystic bullcrap?

Actually, science has an answer: We find pleasure in groups of 3s because **your brain is always looking for patterns**, and 3 is the minimum amount needed to see a pattern.

Think of it like this: If something happens once, it's just a fluke. Twice, a coincidence. Three times, we see a pattern and create meaning based on the pattern.

But why is your brain looking for patterns in the first place?

Because patterns give us a sense of control, making us feel less helpless. Once you see a pattern, you subconsciously think, "I can see what's going on here and can prepare for the future."

In other words, patterns help you survive.

And you can use this survival mechanism to make your copy memorable.

Using the Rule of 3 in your copywriting

"Use three for completeness, wholeness, roundness", says Roy Peter Clark in "Writing Tools: 55 Essential Strategies for Every Writer."

How can you practically apply this advice to headlines and body copy?

Use these 3 techniques:

1) Repeat the same word 3 times for emphasis

Do you want to hit a point home in your headline? Emulate pastors, songwriters, and politicians: Repeat, repeat, repeat.

Specifically, use the rhetorical technique **"anaphora"**, the repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of successive clauses.

Grammatically, this technique usually looks like this:

- Adjective-Noun
- Adjective-Noun
- Adjective-Noun

Occasionally, it can look like this:

- Adverb-Verb
- Adverb-Verb
- Adverb-Verb

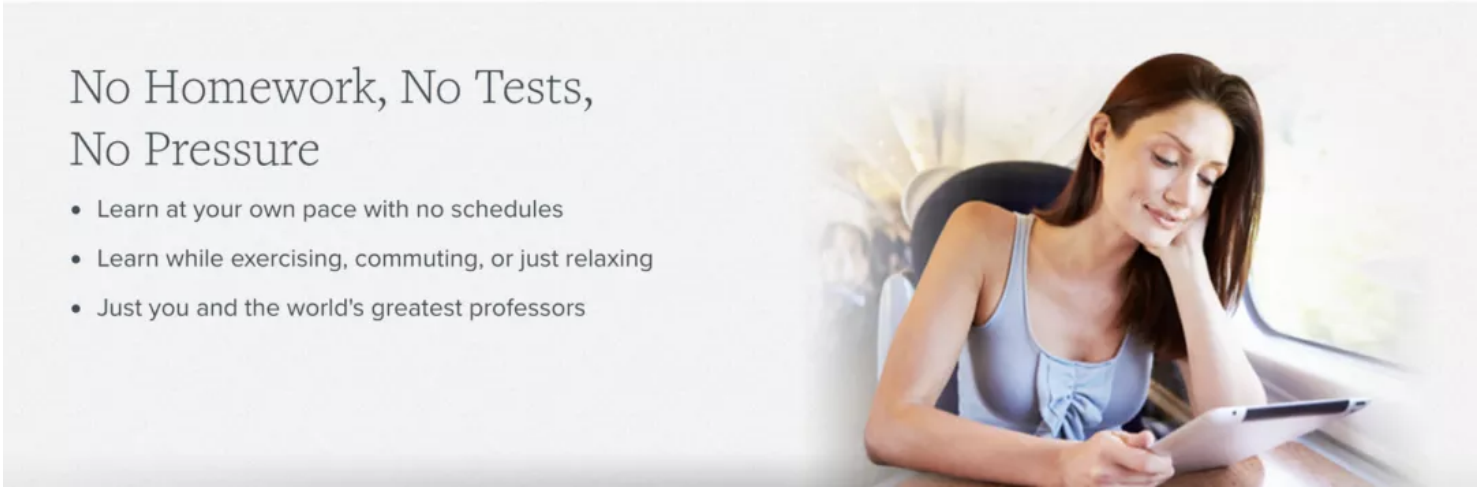
How to use this technique:

1. **Focus:** Find the core attribute of the thing you're selling.
2. **Brainstorm:** Play with the thesaurus to find the adjectives or adverbs related to the core attribute.
3. **Find triples**: Find 3 important things in your product or service that could coherently be paired with one of the adjectives or adverbs.

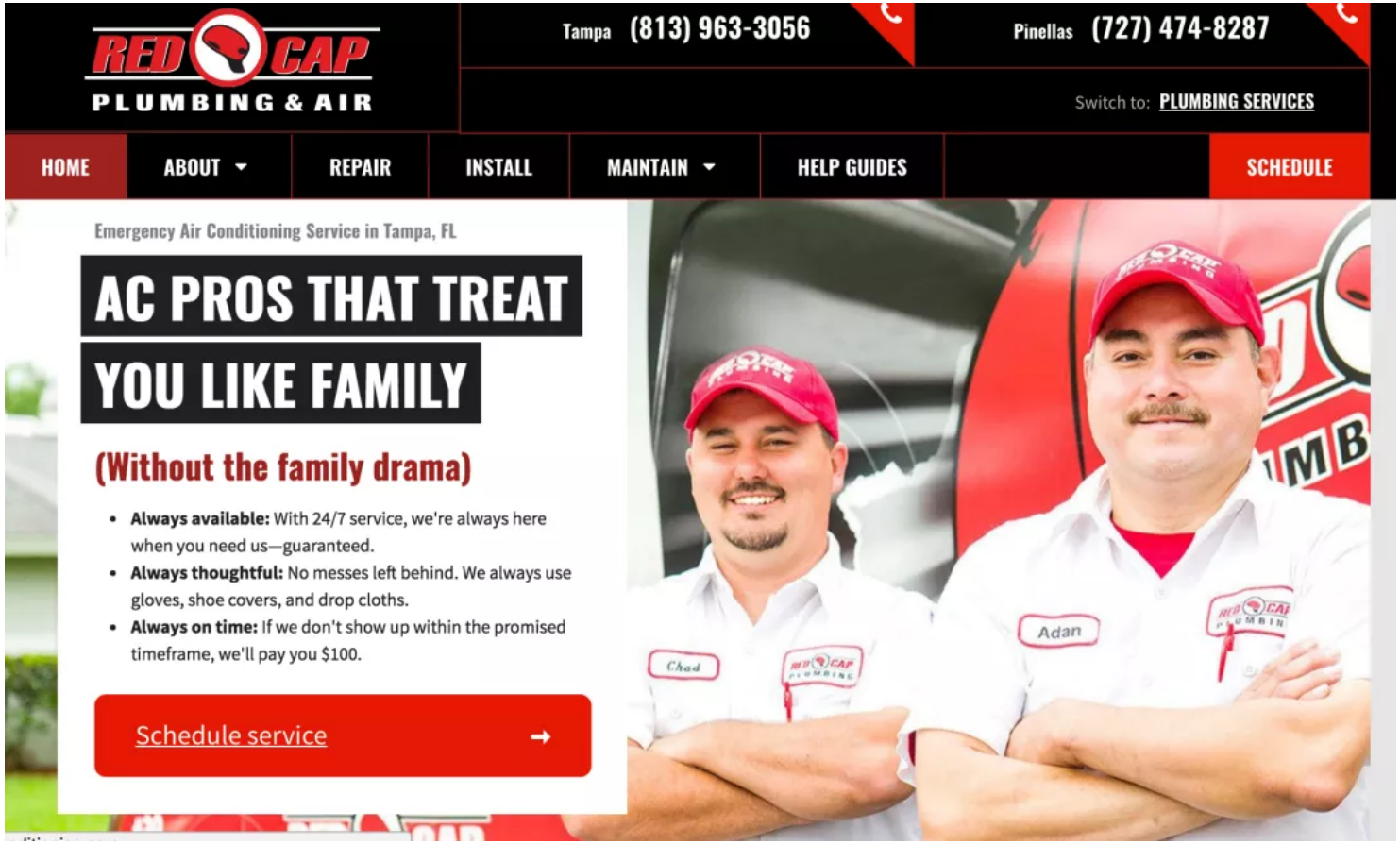
Examples of this technique:

"Any" is repeated 3 times to emphasize that the service ubiquitous and convenient.

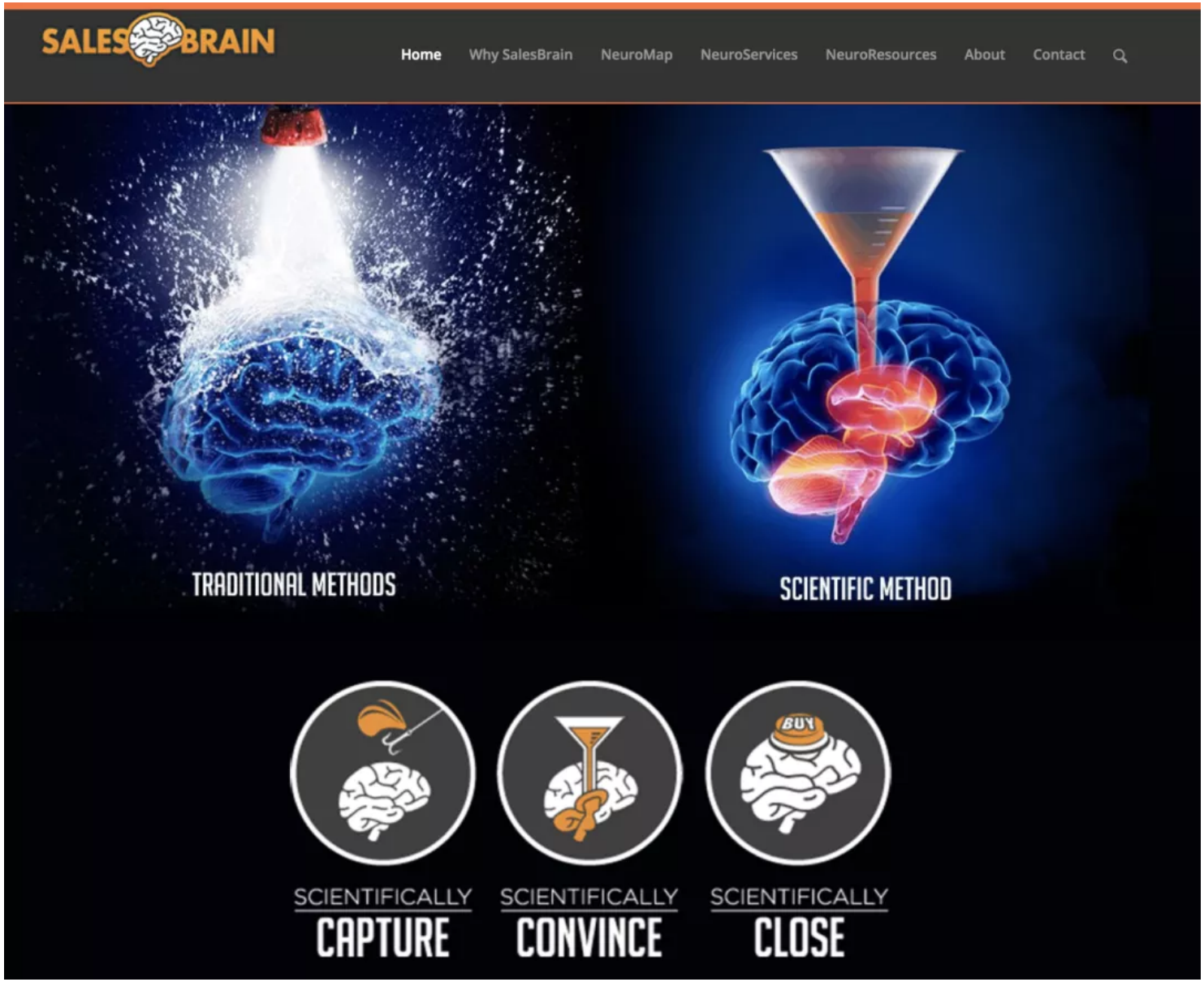
Found at my local Arby's, this poster emphasizes that the methods used to make the food are authentic. In my opinion, the writer should have ended with a rhyming play on words by saying "Real good".



The Great Courses Plus uses triple “No’s” to emphasize that they don’t have the typical problems of most courses.



Here's copy I wrote for Red Cap Plumbing and Air. I used "always" to emphasize that they are a reliable family member.



Sales Brain uses “scientifically” in the rare adverb-verb pattern to emphasize what makes their marketing methods different. In my opinion, ”scientifically” isn’t a good choice because has too many syllables, creating a mouthful for the reader and thus throwing off the rhythm.

2) Simplify a process or feature list to 3 steps

All stories have a beginning, middle, and end; a hook, build-up, and payoff. Use this pattern to condense and simplify a product or service process to 3 steps.

Grammatically, it looks like this:

- Verb phrase
- Verb phrase
- Verb phrase

How to use this technique

For services, as you're structuring your copy, ask yourself:

1. What kicks off the process? What will you do first?
2. What happens in the middle of the process?
3. What happens at the end of the process?

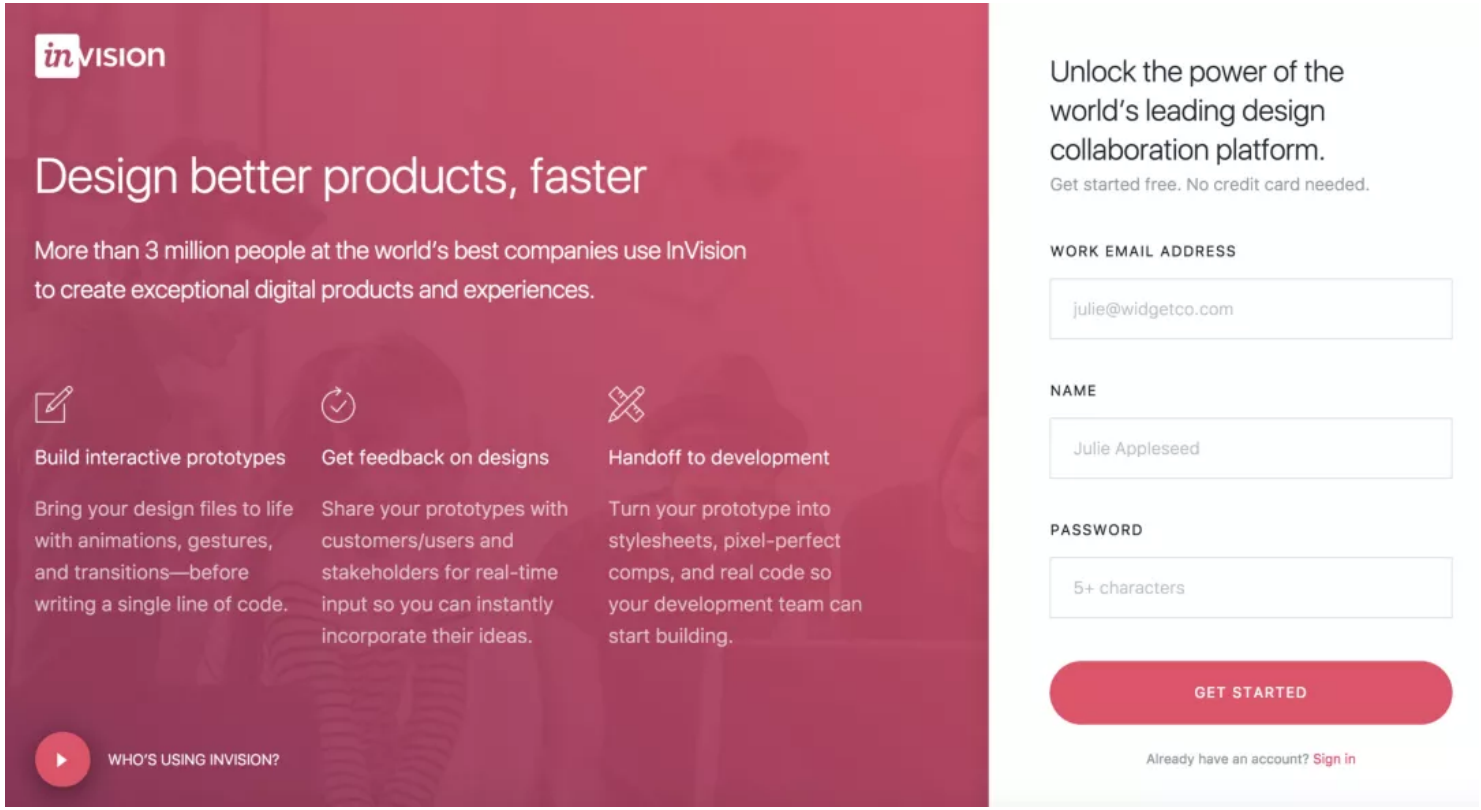
Then use 3 verbs or verb phrases to summarize each step in that process.

For simple products, just explain how the product works or how to use it in 3 steps.

For complicated products, like software, do this:

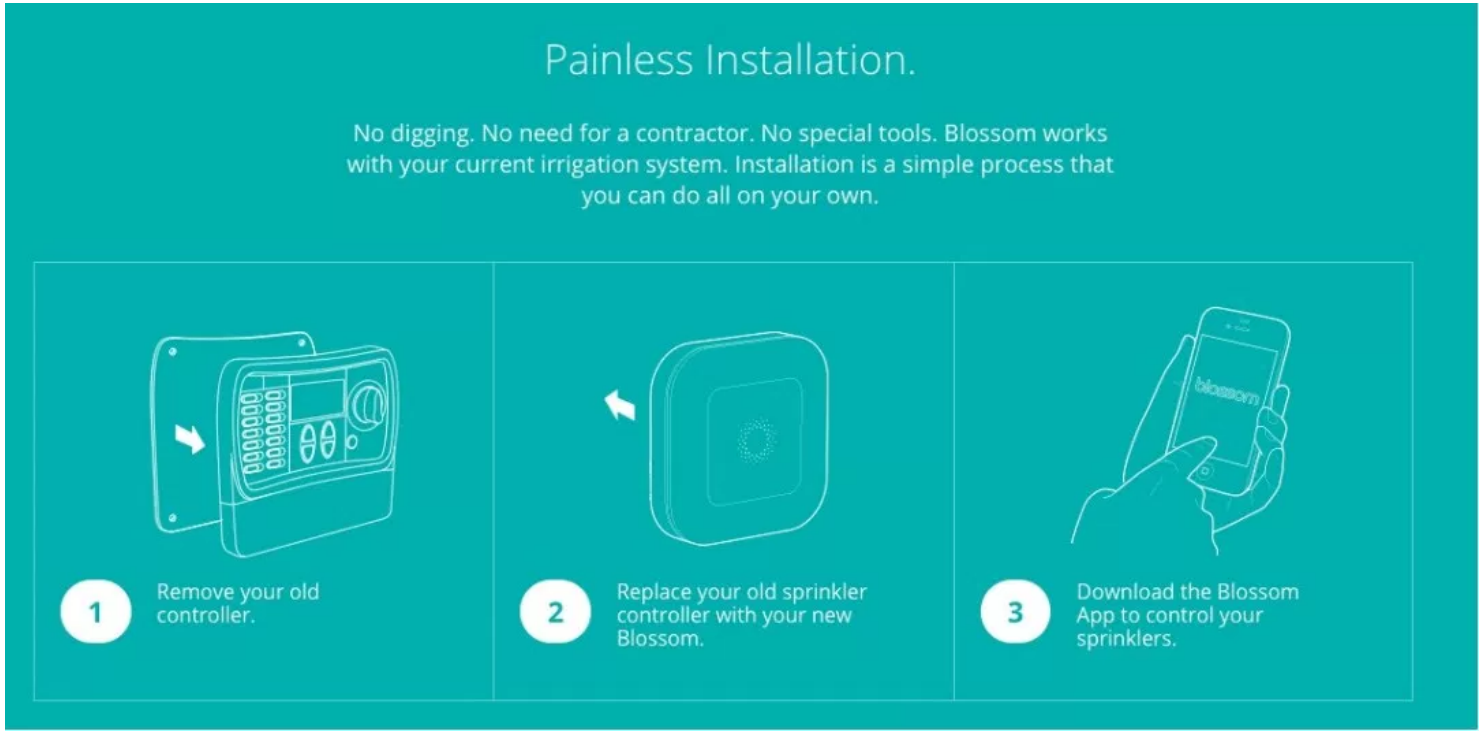
1. List all the product's features.
2. Group the features together by when you'd use them in your audience workflow.
3. Represent those feature groupings with a subhead in verb phrase form.

Examples of this technique

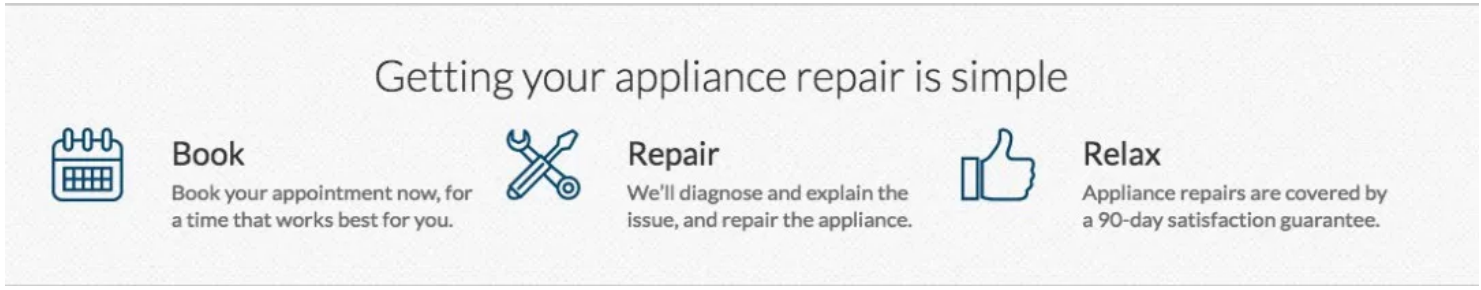


Invision groups their features together in a chronological workflow:

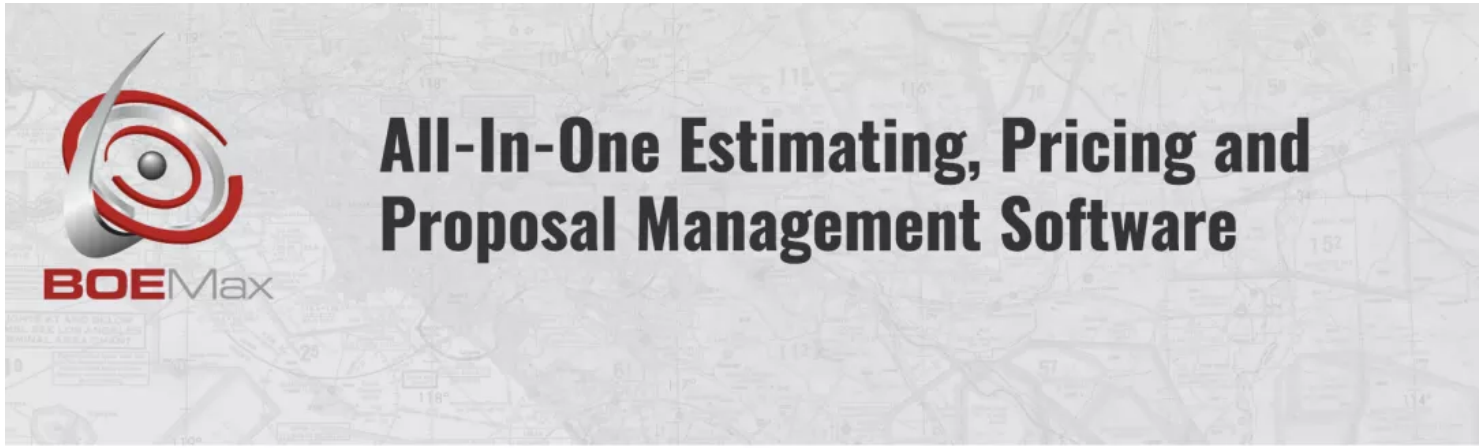
1. Build interactive prototypes
2. Get feedback on designs
3. Handoff to development



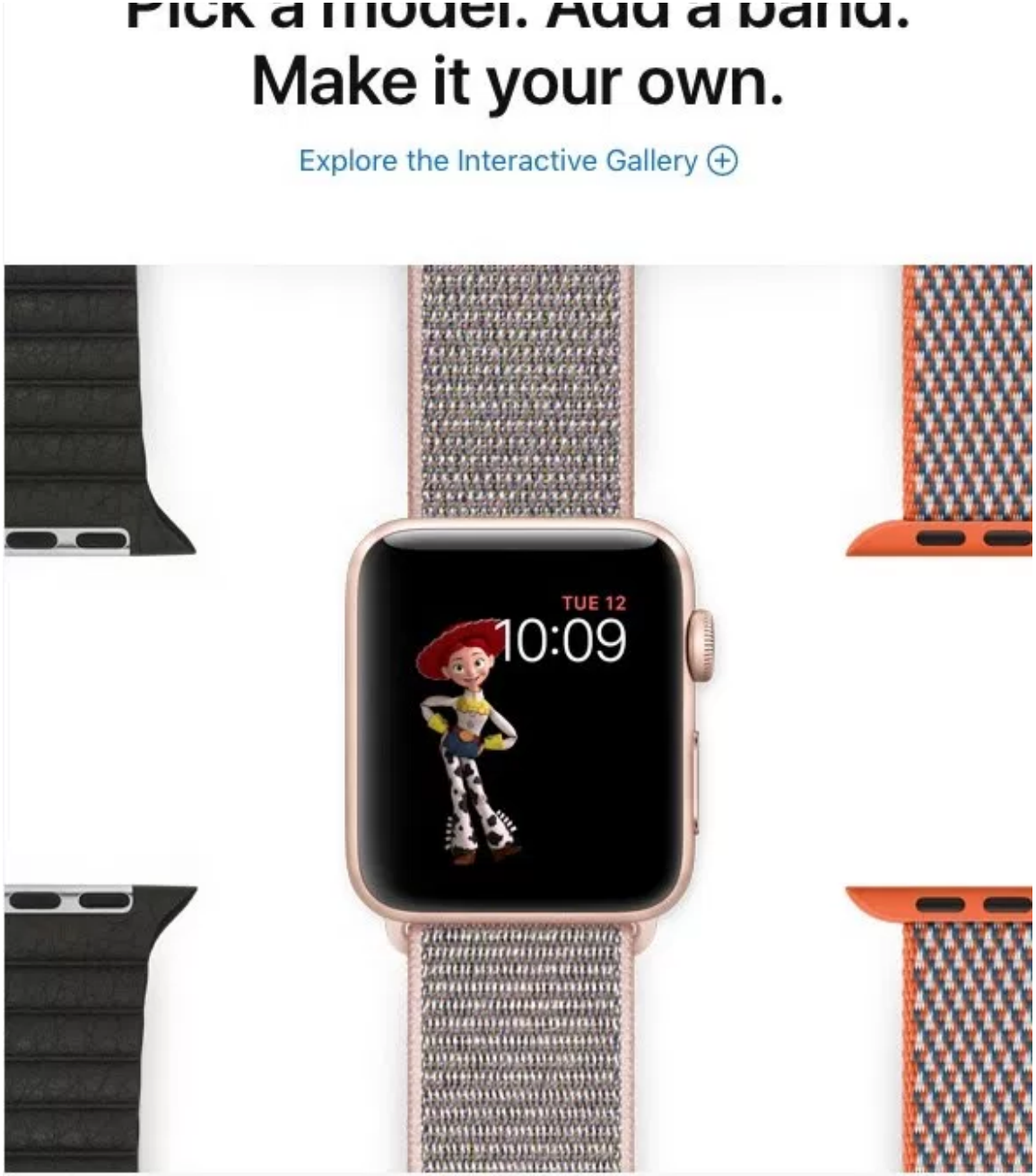
This copy shows how to install Blossom, the smart watering controller. Notice that the intro body copy also uses 3 “No’s”. Excellent use of a triple next to a triple!



Sears Home Services simplifies their appliance repair process to 3 steps: Book. Repair. Relax.



Here's copy I wrote for BOEMax. It's a B2B software with hundreds of features. So I grouped them together by the target audience's workflow: Estimate. Price. Bid.



Apple is subtly telling you how to choose among the several iWatch options.

3) Build expectations, then break them to grab attention

"The Father, Son, and holy crap it's cold in here." Imagine if your pastor said that at the beginning of service. You'd all be surprised because you were expecting "Holy Spirit" to complete the Trinity. As a result, the pastor would have your attention. All according to plan.

Taking an audience's expectations and breaking them is a great way to command attention. You can combine this technique with the Rule of 3: Just use an **unexpected item** at the end of a list of 3 items.

Grammatically, this technique can take many forms. But I've seen Apple use this one:

1. Adjective
2. Adjective similar to #1
3. Adjective dissimilar to #1 and #2

How to use this technique

1. List all the adjectives you could use to describe your product.
2. Group them into ones that are similar to each other in kind or type.
3. Choose 2 that are similar to each other and 1 that's dissimilar from the previous 2. Make sure the dissimilar one is the most interesting one that conveys the biggest benefit.
4. Add the dissimilar adjective to the end of the list. Don't give away the punchline.

Examples of this technique