Paul Smith shows how, with the indiscriminate use of jargon, a killing can be made in web design.

Crime and punctuation

A reader writes: 'Not withstanding your striking resemblance to George Clooney, I consider you to be one of the finest writers of our generation.' Obviously I paraphrase here. What the reader actually wrote was: 'You sad, demented fool. You're an affront to the good name of journalism. You clearly have no idea what you're talking about. And that orange hair looks ridiculous.'

Actually he, along with many others who have written to say something similar, have a fair point (not about the hair, mind) but it seems to be no bar in the development of my career. After all, I seem to be able to not only make a living out of writing — no, really — but I also have the advantage of fashioning a career in an industry in its infancy at a time when everyone wants to know about it, yet everyone thinks it's incredibly complex. And, were it not perceived thus, people like me and magazines such as this would be out of business.

However, as a direct result of this evil software-developer/technology-journalist conspiracy, computers remain difficult and mysterious even as they claim to get easier to use. And, just to keep things interesting, we throw in a new element every now and then to shake up the waters. Most recently, of course, this has been the internet. Everyone has been persuaded, and I promise it's not me doing this, that they need a web site. Sure enough, because we make web sites seem complex, these people come to us to get them written for them. These days, we're all web developers. Tim, for example, writes: 'Please could you give me some advice I understand your (sic) of the web design/consultation industry, I am looking to do some work in that area part time while I am studying at university it would be appreciated if you could give me some tips on getting clients and getting started once again thank you very much for your time.' Tim is proof of how easy it is to get into this business. You see, Tim has rather grand notions of my skill-set. Any notion that extends beyond, say, doting on Edward the cat and some facility for multiplayer Rainbow Six would probably expose my limitations and make me blush.

Funnier still, Tim has developed this notion solely on the basis, I believe, of my web site. Any of you who have had so much spare time as to visit it will know how amusing this is. Still, it is my mission to inform and so I provide the following advice to Tim and any like him throwing their help-seeking nets so wide as to include the likes of me.

1. Learn the language: it doesn't really matter what language, simply the ability to sound like you know what you're on about. Use terms such as 'disintermediation'... come to think of it, just use 'disintermediation'; it's a remarkable, possibly magical term whose use will automatically secure a contract from the most hostile of prospects.

2. Try to avoid anyone with more knowledge of the web than 'I've seen a couple of sites'. You don't want to get into the position where one of your clients realises, quite correctly, that the work you've charged them three months for only took half an hour.

3. Further to (2), never, EVER mention HTML editors apart from Notepad. This is the fundamental law of web editing. It must never get out. It is as sacrosanct as the magicians' code that prevents them from revealing how

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tricks are performed, and the airline travellers' code that prevents them from revealing that secret phrase we use to get up an upgrade; you know the one.

4. If you can, do contra deals. These are great. So far, next year's skiing is free and I've got all my silver trinkets for the next decade sorted out.

5. And, Tim, don't be afraid to use punctuation. It's your friend. That's my advice. Take it or (if you've any sense) leave it, but prospective clients will be put off if you are unable to string a coherent sentence together, in almost any career path you may choose.

Me, I'm already onto the next thing. Today is ISDN day, *chez moi*. Next month I'll tell you why exactly it represents a culmination of the most painful experience since my hard disk AND my backup crashed.

www.paulsmith.com