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Writing for the Web

Introduction

All too often Web writing does not support users in achieving their main goal: finding information as quickly and easily as possible. Scannable, concise and objective writing styles make a positive difference in Web users' performance and subjective satisfaction.

This module will introduce you to tips, techniques and practices that will enable you to create readable and interesting web content that will keep readers returning to your site.

Writing for the web involves much more than cutting and pasting from print brochures. Anyone who wants to write for web sites, whether freelance or as part of a web team, must understand information design, editing and readability.

Differences between Paper and Online Publishing

An audience will approach and process print and online information presented to them in very different ways. Realizing that these differences exist and adjusting your writing style accordingly will result in your Web site taking a much more usable form.

Web Facts

- **79%** of users always scan; only **16%** read word-by-word
- Reading from computer screens is **25%** slower than from paper
- Web content should be **50%** the size of its paper equivalent.

(Facts taken from Sun Microsystems Web site on "Writing for the Web".
<http://www.sun.com/980713/webwriting/wftw9.html>)

Paper Medium Publishing

- Your document forms a whole and the user is focused on the entire set of information.

Web Site Publishing

- You need to split each document into multiple hyperlinked pages as users are not willing to read long pages

- Users can enter a site at any page and move between pages as they choose, so make every page independent and explain its topic without assumptions about the previous page seen by the user.
- Make the word count for the online version of a given topic about half the word count used when writing for print. Users find it painful to have to read too much text on screens, and they read about 25% more slowly from screens than from paper.
- Web users are critical and impatient. They have not chosen your site because you are great....(even though you might be) but because they have something to do.
- Credibility is important on the web where users connect to unknown servers at remote locations. You have to work to earn a user's trust, which is rapidly lost if you use exaggerated claims or overly boastful language.
- The web is an informal and immediate medium compared to print, so users appreciate a somewhat informal writing style.
- Use simple sentence structures. Convoluted writing and complex words are even harder to understand online.
- The web is a fluid medium. Update pages to reflect any changes that take place.
- Statistics, numbers and examples all need to be recent or credibility suffers.

Characteristics of the Web that Affect Writing Style

There are four major characteristics of the Web that affect how to write effectively for this medium:

1. Readability

The speed at which readers can read and understand text

2. Navigational Model (context and hypertext)

The ways in which readers access information, either by their own understanding or by a model you created

3. Audience

Who is reading this material?

4. Purpose

Why is this information on the web? Why would people want to read it?

Readability

On the Web, readability is affected by a number of factors not found in print publications. These factors reduce reading speed by 25%. Reading 75 words online feels like reading 100 words in print. Factors include:

- **Screen Size.** Unlike print you have little control over the way a reader receives your text. 100 words on a Palm sized computer is a lot to read. The same text at 1024 x 768 is a reasonable amount.
- **Resolution.** Print text is 600 dpi. Online text is 72 dpi. This difference produces a jagged text that is more difficult to read and tires eyes.
- **"Noise."** Everything on screen that distracts from the message of the content. Banner ads, meaningless graphics and formatting are all "noise".

Writing for Readability

In studies conducted of how users read on the Web it has been concluded that users do not actually read online: instead they scan text, picking out individual words and sentences.

They have short attention spans and want to get the information they need quickly and easily.

Page layouts that make skimming easy fare better than those that don't.

Note: John Morkes and Jakob Nielsen have led extensive studies in writing for the web and usability issues. Their study results can be found at: <http://www.useit.com>

During their studies, Jakob Nielsen and John Morkes discovered that content is "king" in the minds of the Web site users. When asked for feedback on a Web page, users would comment on the quality and relevance of the content to a much greater extent than they would comment on navigational issues or the page elements that we consider to be the "user interface". Therefore, content and the way it is delivered to the user is of the utmost importance when creating a Web site.

Scannable text calls attention to key information. To be more fully effective, Web pages can employ scannable text using some of the following techniques:

Highlighted keywords

- Use the `` tag rather than the `` tag for keyword highlighting. (since STRONG is usually rendered as boldface, this is typically the best way to highlight words. The `` tag is usually rendered as italics).
- Don't use blue for colored text—this color is reserved for hyperlinks.

- Highlight only key information-carrying words. Avoid highlighting entire sentences.

Other Readability suggestions

- Choose appropriate fonts and colors
- Use online fonts and Web-safe colors.
- Use Meaningful sub-headings
- Use Bulleted lists. Bulleted and numbered lists slow down the scanning eye and can draw attention to important points.
- Use only one idea per paragraph. Use a second paragraph for a second idea, since users tend to skip any second point as they scan over a paragraph.
- Chunk information together. Group information into small, complete sections.
- Use the inverted pyramid style. Start the page with the conclusion as well as a short summary of the remaining contents.
- Use half the word count (of conventional writing). Ensuring that you carefully organize your information, using words and categories that make sense to the audience, using topic sentences and limiting each paragraph to one idea, will go a long way towards improving the readability of your Web site.

Studies have shown that the following are important to Web site users:

- **Simplicity:** A simple and informal writing style
- **Credibility:** the quality of a site's content influences users evaluations of credibility
- **Outbound links,** which can increase credibility (users rely on hyperlinks to assess credibility of the information contained in web sites).
- **Humor:** should be used with caution (given peoples' different preferences for humor, it is important for a Web writer to know the audience, before including humor in a site).
- **Speed:** Users want to get their information quickly.

Text Summary

- Should be **scannable**.
- Should be **concise**.
- Users like **Hypertext**.

- Users like **summaries**
- Users like the **inverted pyramid style**.
- **Graphics and text** should complement each other.

White-Space

While using lots of white space in a document has long been considered to make it more readable, the User Interface Engineering Group found that it makes a Web page *less useful*.¹ Their studies indicated

The more white-space there was on a site, the less successful users were at finding information.

The more white-space, the lower users rated the site in terms of:

- Finding things easily
- Ease of reading
- Ease of searching
- Overall appearance
- Ease of use
- Productivity.

Their theory as to why this is:

Skimming is, by definition, a very different activity than reading. When people are hunting for information, they benefit by covering a lot of ground quickly. White-space spreads out the information and slows the hunt.

Web Site Usability p. 76.

Scrolling

Conventional wisdom also held that people don't like to scroll, hence the most information should not be "below the fold" in newspaper parlance, or below the screen such that you have to scroll to see it. Of course, different sized screens, resolutions etc. make it impossible to know how big anyone's screen is. But more to the point, usability studies point out that no one minds scrolling down. (They do get annoyed at scrolling *across*, however...) The only issue that turned up is that users quit reading when they hit a horizontal line or a line of very small text, as they think it's the copyright information that signals the logical end of the page.

¹ Spool, Jared et al, Web Site Usability, p. 75.

Graphics

Studies indicted that graphic design has no impact on a site's usability. However, users reported that they couldn't concentrate when there was animation on the screen.

Characteristics of Web Writing Style

These are general characteristics but they can be observed in many successful internet and intranet sites:

- Informal style
- Speech-like writing
- Audience targeting
- Layered information
- Brief and to the point

Using a Web Writing Style

Use common words.

Don't use: Utilized, bucketized, transmogrified

Use: Used, put into categories, modified or changed.

Use active voice.

Don't use: "43 studies were conducted and the conclusions that were reached were..."

Use: "We conducted 43 studies and we concluded that..."

Write concretely.

Don't use: "Besides connecting individual remote users at their client desktops, the Easy Modem supports wide area LAN-LAN internet working with concurrent bridging and routing over both dial-up and leased lines...."

Use: "The company produces the Easy Modem. This is a benefit because....."

Be precise.

Don't use: She discovered an affinity for web development at a young age.

Use: Mary Jane began to study Web design at 8 years old.

Write the way you speak.

Don't use: Last week we happened on an opportunity to attend....

Use: This week we headed to San Francisco, CA--land of fog, boats and earthquakes. Why did we go, you ask? In a word: shopping. The other reason, and the one we told our boss, was to attend the Web seminar.....

Navigation and Information Architecture

The navigational model is how users access information. Common ways for readers to (before and after it) and randomly (understanding information regardless of what comes before or after it). In print you are usually writing for one or the other of these methods.

Online, you must write for both.

Factors that affect the online navigational model:

Context

Understanding why information exists and who wrote it.

Hypertext

The ability to link information to other information.

Information architecture

The structure of information

Writing for the Navigational Model

Techniques to help readers use the navigational model:

- Include contextual information on every page
 - What is this site about?
 - Where's home?
 - When was it last updated?
 - Who wrote it?
 - Why should I trust the information?
- Make your links clear
- Text should indicate link
- Use nouns and action verbs.
- Write your paragraph, then add your link.

- Use consistent navigation Place similar elements in similar locations.
- Use an information architecture that is appropriate to the information.

Audience Analysis

Audience analysis is not unique to online writing but it is essential to create interesting, relevant and informative web content.

To find out about your audience you should ask the following questions:

- Who are they?
- What are they looking for?
- What are their goals?
- When and how are they looking for information?

The answers to these questions should affect:

Language

Use words that are common to your audience to create a community effect.

Content

Find out what they want to know. It is much more important than what you want to tell them.

Organization

Organize around how your audience looks for information, not how you think it should be presented.

The Web offers a myriad of ways of finding out about your audience. Use them!

User feedback

E-mail, discussion groups, forms

Ask others

Editor, sales, similar sites

Ask them

Usability testing, focus groups, polls

Use Web statistics

Web tracking software

Information Architecture

Information architecture is the study of the structure of information. Understanding information architecture will help you create a usable navigational model and help people find your content. In particular, it is concerned with the following:

- How information is organized.
- How chunks of information are related to each other.
- How people access that information.

Search engines are a useful tool for the user. Remember to develop your site with search functions in mind.

Information architecture is important to writers because if people can't find the information, they will never read it.

Common Ways to Organize Online Information

If an organization does not already exist readers will create their own models to access the information. This can be very frustrating for them. Try to think about how your information should be organized. Some common organizations for online information are:

- **Hierarchy:** Layered content with each layer expanding on the previous layer.
- **Linear/Sequential:** Content must be accessed in a particular order to ensure comprehension.
- **Star:** Content that is grouped around a central topic but can be accessed in any order.
- **Hub:** Same as star, but with a connection between sub-topics.

Writing Clear Links and Micro-Content

You lose 75% of your readers on each click they have to make to find information. *However, readers will continue to click if they think the link will take them to the information they want.*

Editing Print Collateral

A considerable amount of information that appears on web sites originated in print. Copying and pasting from a print document is not sufficient for web readers. They are suspicious of “brochure-ware” and obviously repurposed content. Whenever possible,

write new material for online publication. However, when you need to edit material that was written for print, follow these steps:

- **Shorten sentences**

Avoid compound sentences. Avoid superfluous words

- **Break long paragraphs into smaller ones.**

2-3 sentences per paragraph is appropriate.

- **Divide sections into self-sufficient chunks.**

100 word chunks of information that you can understand without reading the previous information.

- **Use lists instead of paragraphs.**

Bulleted lists are easy to understand and scan.

- **Add headings**

Headings will pull the reader into the material

- **Change terminology that is specific to print.**

"on our web site", "on the next page", "in this magazine".

- **Make the writing style more casual.**

Read it out loud. If it sounds stuffy, your short-attention span readers are going to move on.

- **Include links to related material.**

There is a wealth of information out there. Use it to your advantage.

Editing Web Content

Mistakes on your web site affect your reputation. Many mistakes can be avoided by careful editing. Sites should undergo a content and copy-edit.

Content edit

Is the language appropriate? Are paragraphs properly organized? Is the information clear? Is any information missing? Should sentences be deleted? Is the information accurate?

When you are doing a content edit, use a checklist like the following:

- Is the link text the right length?
- Does the link text indicate where it goes?
- Are the correct words used for links? (Nouns and verb phrases, not “click here”)
- Are there too many links? Too few?

Chunked information

- Is the information standalone? Does each chunk make sense out of context?
- Are paragraphs short? (2-3 sentences)
- Could the information be broken up into smaller pieces?

Content and organization

Is it easy to find the most important information?

Do longer sections use an inverted pyramid style?

Contextual information

Is it easy to determine where you are on a site?

Can you tell what the purpose of the page is?

Is it obvious where to get more information or help?

Language

Are the language, tone and style appropriate for the audience? For the purpose?

Proofreading

Are the text, spelling and language perfect?

Spelling

- Is the text in meta tags spelled correctly?
- Is link text spelled correctly?
- Are words spelled according to style guides?
- Are trademarks used where necessary?

Readability

- Have unreadable punctuation marks been avoided?
- Are there strange breaks that make reading difficult?
- Have distracting formatting styles been used sparingly?

Language

- Are sentences grammatically correct?
- Could extraneous words be removed?
- Could shorter words be substituted for longer ones?
- Could more common words be substituted for obscure ones?
- Is the language consistent?

Consistency

- Have color and other indicators been used appropriately?
- Have headings and other styles been used consistently?

Print!

- Does the print copy print correctly?

Editing tips

To make sure you are using the appropriate tone and language, try reading the information out loud.

Print it out, it's easier on the eyes.

Quick Tips: How to Write for the Web

Know your audience

- What does your audience want and need?
- What problems do they have? Do you have a solution for them?
- What kind of tone will users respond to? Do they need to be educated?
- Do they expect technical information? Do they expect to be amused or entertained?
- How can you differentiate your content from that of companies offering similar products or solutions?

- Will the content be bookmarked and used as reference material?
- Will most users print the content or read/scan it on-line?

General Tips

- Tell users what problem you are solving.
- Spell out the benefits: how your solution will save them money, make them more competitive, help them grow, etc.
- Include a "call to action;" drive them to sale or tell them how to request more information.
- Engage the user through appropriate tone
- Use the direct address ("you") where warranted—it tends to be less formal.
- Use "we" rather than "Network Appliance" where warranted.
- Get to the point quickly: You have only a few sentences to hook your readers or lose them.
- Write conclusions first, details later.
- Make your content easy to scan
- Write meaningful headings (not simply "clever" ones) that emphasize benefits.
- Use bulleted lists to draw attention to key points.
- If users read only the headings and bullet points, would your key messages come through?
- Select the most important benefit and tout it above all others.
- Keep paragraphs and sentences short.
- Introduce one idea per paragraph.
- Use boldface for emphasis within a paragraph.
- Learn to write "chunks" of information-text passages usually no more than 100 words long.
 - Chunks allow users to easily scan and understand bits of information.
 - Chunks should be understandable without reference to other text passages.

- Chunks can be scanned in any order.
- Chunks will more easily migrate to a dynamic content delivery process.

Use multiple media to deliver content

- Text is not always the most effective way to communicate.
- Add photographs, illustrations, or PDF files where warranted.
- Animation, video, or sound-used sparingly-can offer significant value to the user.
- Consider custom Web applications (particularly where users can supply data and receive custom results).
- Make sure these media do more than simply duplicate content; they should add a new dimension to your communication.

Write "lean"

- Aim for half the word count of conventional writing-cut, cut, cut!
- Use present tense, not future.
- Edit out extraneous adjectives.
- Break up long sentences into short ones.
- Use parallel construction, especially in bulleted lists.
- Avoid extended metaphors; because users scan Web content, you want them to be able to understand each "chunk" of content on its own.

Use active verbs

- Active verbs convey emotion, excitement.
- Passive verbs are boring, bureaucratic, and keep readers at a distance.

Write clear, direct prose

- Use words that users can understand.
- Name and label consistently.
- Include numbers and factual data wherever possible.
- Avoid overused buzzwords such as "Cool," "Check it out," "Click here," "And more!," and "Hot!"

- Keep the marketing hype (promotional hyperbole, extra superlatives, or cryptic jargon) to a minimum.

Write with global users in mind

- Stay away from direct comparisons to the competition, and from unspecified legal claims and guarantees. These are inappropriate or illegal in many countries.
- Avoid references and metaphors that could limit your audience.
- Substitute shorter words for longer words or phrases.

Use trademarks and logos correctly

- Always use a trademark term as an adjective modifying a noun.
- Mark the first occurrence of a trademark with the appropriate trademark symbol.

Proofread carefully

- Print everything out on paper for final proofreading.
- Put the text aside and review it later with "fresh" eyes.

Content for E-Commerce Sites

The most successful e-commerce sites build community and reputation by offering valuable information with a low-key sales pitch. The integration of content with web stores is an effective way to gain customer loyalty.

Including content on e-commerce sites makes them successful because:

- Most people go online to find information
- Bring them to your site by giving them what they are looking for.
- People look for credible information from trusted sources. If you have a brand name, capitalize on it by giving advice. If you want to build your brand, give good advice.
- Blending content and shopping successfully:
 - Provide reviews from real people: www.amazon.com
 - Provide how-to-information related to the products you sell: www.garden.com
 - Do not segregate the store from the content: www.actionace.com (imagine if a bricks and mortar store tried to do this)

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