

Writing for the web

Remember - every word in a website should justify itself by performing a function

A website is a fast and effective way of getting your message across to thousands of people. More than anything else, quality content determines the success of a site. While many of us get bogged down in the importance of the appearance of a website - stylish graphics, clever animations, the colour, links and layout - quality web design should be all about making it as easy as possible for the visitor to find, access and read the information they are looking for. This briefing looks at ways to make it easier for you to do this, and so increase your chances of attracting – and keeping – your visitors.

Why do we need to think about this?

Writing for the web is very different to writing for print. It's a demanding task for writers. You have to grab the attention of your readers in just a few seconds, or you can lose them very quickly. Your material needs to be organised in quite a different way to a printed publication. It needs to be clear and concise, as reading from a monitor is 25% slower than reading from a printed page. In addition, your product is never finished, and will need constant revision to remain up-to-date.

To make your site successful, it's important to focus on exactly what you want it to say. You need to have a clear purpose, clearly expressed. Many sites fail simply because they have not been properly thought out or well written. So to communicate well with the user, you must concentrate on giving them information that is relevant, well structured and well presented.

So, how do we do it? 10 easy steps

1. Be Aware of your Audience


Before you start writing, always ask yourself: who am I writing for? Analyse your audience - the content you create should reflect the readers you want to attract. Are you looking for students, employers, funders, kindred spirits? Are they experienced in using the web, or complete novices? Try to imagine a typical user of your service, or typical member of your audience. What are they like? What do they find interesting, value, and appreciate? Always bear in mind your readers and write for them.

Whatever you decide about your desired audience remember that on the web many other people may visit by accident or out of curiosity – so even if your site is highly specialised it should offer something to the casual reader. Think of web readers as busy, impatient and critical people who are trying to find something out quickly.

2. Be Concise

Web content should have roughly 50% of the word count of its paper equivalent. When writing for the web, therefore, it's wise to write a little tighter and meatier than you would for print. Remember that your readers can click away at any second. Your aim is to try to keep their attention by sticking closely to your topic. Avoid repetition and cut out excess wording.

For example:

 This website has been established by a number of members of the Quilters Society from Littleton, which is in the Yorkshire area of the United Kingdom, in order to let people know about all the things the society is involved in doing.

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 This website promotes the activities of the Littleton Quilters Society (Yorkshire, UK).

George Orwell famously had several tips for concise writing, which ring particularly true for website content:

1. If it's possible to cut a word out, always cut it out. Ask yourself whether there is superfluous information in your content. As well as being the author, you have to act as an editor - be unflinching about asking yourself: is this clear? Or necessary? Is there a simpler or shorter way to say it?
2. Never use a long word when a short one will do. Use simple sentence structures - convoluted writing and complex words are even harder to understand online. Don't overuse adjectives and adverbs – they add length and slow down the pace of an article.
3. Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent. These sorts of words exclude people.
4. Never use a metaphor, simile or other common figure of speech. They may be taken literally.

3. Be Unusual

Use interesting descriptions and ideas, not worn clichés. Well-worn phrases turn your reader off and you will lose their attention. If you've heard the phrase before, so have they. Try and use words in unique and arresting combinations to convey the atmosphere or feel of your event or group.

4. Be Natural

It's important to write like you speak: simply and directly.

- People haven't got time to wade through flowery prose, littered with long words and complicated phrases.
- Bear in mind that the only contact you have with the reader is text on a computer screen (ie there is no facial expression, hand gesturing or intonation) and so to reach your audience you have to be able to overcome the web's inherently impersonal nature with words.
- Take advantage of the fact that the web is an immediate medium, compared to print, and that users appreciate a somewhat informal and conversational style.
- Make your text personal so that it gives the feel of your organisation. This can be just as demanding as writing formally, if not more so (it does not mean producing something unprofessional) – but with practice you will learn to find a good balance and be able to cover a lot of hard information in a readable, entertaining way.
- Avoid idioms and puns, especially as these might not work for international users.
- However, do try and find other ways to be lively - you don't want to economize so much that your prose becomes stilted and humourless.
- A good way to make sure your writing is crisp and clear is to read what you write aloud. You may feel stupid, but you will quickly learn what works and what doesn't. If you need to pause for breath, your sentences are too long. If you need to re-read something, it means it isn't clear. If it sounds pompous, it probably is.

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5. Be Credible

Use powerful language – but don't deceive your reader either. Credibility is very important on the web, where users are connecting to unknown and remote locations; exaggerated claims or overly boastful language can mean you lose the reader's trust before you have earned it. So keep the marketing hype to a minimum and instead make your content objective. Always check for typos and grammatical errors. Furthermore, include links to other (reputable) sources on the net to back up your facts, though don't include too many or you risk losing the reader.

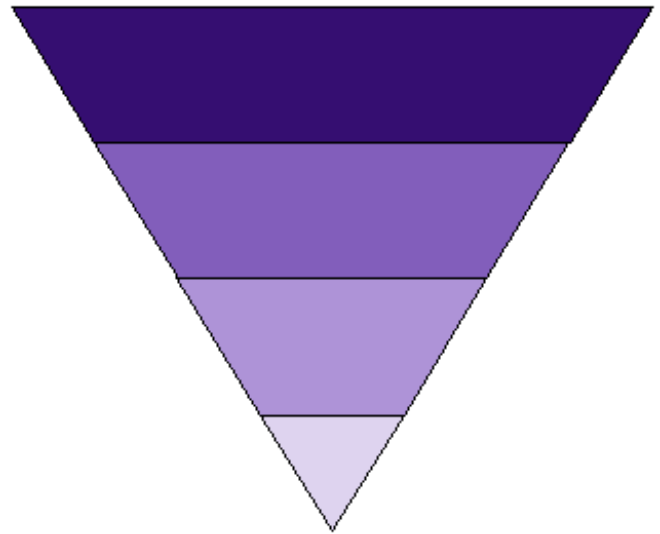
6. Be Knowledgeable

Have all the facts. If you don't know all the details of what you are offering, your readers won't stand a chance! Knowing what you are talking about will give your writing authority and inspire confidence in your reader.

7. Be Direct

Make your points salient and prominent. Web users don't like to scroll through masses of text. Put the most important information at the top, don't bury it in the second or third paragraph. The best way to begin is with the shortest and clearest statement you can make about your topic. Using the 'inverted pyramid' style of writing, you should start the page with the conclusion and a short summary of the remaining content, and then make each paragraph contain one main idea. Web readers tend to skip to the next paragraph once they've identified a point. Paragraphs on the web should be no more than fifty or so words.

The Inverted Pyramid Writing Style



CRUCIAL INFORMATION

Then add info in descending
order of importance

SUPPORTIVE
INFO

REPETITIVE
INFO

8. Be Attention-grabbing

'Web headings' are like newspaper headlines. Often people will have found your article through a search engine, which displays the headings of any web pages that contain the couple of keywords that they type in. So make sure that your heading uses the important key words that define what the article is about. It needs to grab the reader's interest, otherwise you could lose them – probably forever. Avoid being indirect or clichéd: get to the point using a short, high-impact sentence.

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9. Be “Scannable”

79% of web readers tend to scan quickly through pages and do not read them word-by-word, so you need to organize your text in a more open, loose format than you would in print.

- Be generous with paragraph breaks, to split up large chunks of text into smaller, less forbidding sections. This helps to make the pages a little more eye-friendly, and makes information jump out at the reader, so they don't have to sift through long paragraphs to get at it.
- Use subheadings to keep readers moving through an article. Your subheading should sum up the main ideas from groups of paragraphs to alert readers that something different and potentially interesting is coming up so they will want to keep reading.
- Use bulleted lists to draw attention to important points – they also help to slow down the scanning eye.
- Make the crucial information-carrying words stand out by highlighting them in a bold font. However, avoid highlighting entire sentences or long phrases since a scanning eye can only pick up two or three words at a time.
- Avoid using italics (except perhaps to emphasise one or two words) as they are much harder and slower to read.

10. Be Legible

Finally, make the text as comfortable to read as possible, using a careful choice of colour, font and size. Follow these tips, taken from the RNIB's guidelines.

- Font: Sans serif typefaces like Arial or Verdana are preferable to Times and other serif fonts (that have little 'feet' or 'serifs' at the ends of the letters).
- Size: a minimum of 12 point size type should be used, in order to be clearly legible. Also, avoid **WHOLE WORDS IN CAPITAL LETTERS** (for more than the odd word or two) as they are harder to read.
- Colour: don't use blue text, which is the colour reserved only for links. Always make sure there is high contrast between the text and wording. The better the contrast, the more legible it is. Dark text on a light background is usually easiest to read (eg black text on white or yellow) – or the opposite way round, if used sparingly. However, some contrasting colours are difficult to read, particularly for partially sighted people who can also have difficulties with colour perception (eg avoid red and green together).

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Further Information

There are many useful books and guides to producing web content. In researching this Information Sheet we used:

- A Simple Guide to Writing for your Website by Susannah Ross (Prentice Hall/ Pearson Education Ltd)
- The Web Content Style Guide by Gerry McGovern, Rob Norton & Catherine O'Dowd (Prentice Hall/ Pearson Education Ltd)
- Content Critical by Gerry McGovern & Rob Norton (Prentice Hall/ Pearson Education Ltd)
- Writing for the Web by Crawford Kilian (Self-Counsel Press)
- Clear Print Guide from the Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB) See it Right pack, which gives practical advice on producing accessible information. Guidelines also available on their website www.rnib.org.uk

Other useful websites:

- www.writingfortheweb.co.uk
- www.webpagesthatsuck.com

Other Related Information Sheets

Writing Words that Work
Website Accessibility
Website Promotion Guidelines

Developed with thanks to
Voluntary Arts Network www.voluntaryarts.org



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