

Writing for the Web

Ten steps to writing effective
web content

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Introduction

This guide presents techniques and strategies on how to write effective content for a web site. We'll first suggest ways you can adapt existing printed text for the web. Then we'll show you ten ways you can write new web content that's informative and easy-to-read.

Adapting print content to the web

According to web usability expert Jacob Nielsen, people read a computer screen 25% slower than they read a printed page. Therefore, he concluded, web content should be 50% less than its print counterpart. This does not mean slashing your text to the point it loses its meaning, but that you should learn how to say the same thing with fewer words. Below are a few ways you can do this.

Reduce promotional tone, increase informational tone

Promotional text includes marketing fluff and hype words. This content is usually found in brochures, and is used to create a sense of excitement about a product or service. Most web readers, however, want to feel like they're learning new information rather than being sold on something.

Get rid of redundant content

Delete content from a web page that is located in other areas of your site. For example, if you are transferring content from a brochure to a web site, you do not need to include your organization's address on every page. Simply create a link to your Contact page each time you mention the address.

Review content for technical accuracy

Sometimes you might be able to delete text that is no longer true or timely. When transferring print content to the web, read it carefully to ensure that it's accurate. If necessary, pass the content around to subject matter experts for review (for example, instructors, engineers, and product managers).

Ten steps to effective web writing

Keep these ten steps in mind when writing new content for your web site.

1. Who's your audience?

Knowing your audience is not only the first step toward writing effective web content, but the first step toward **all** effective writing. Here are a few ways to find out who your readers are.

Get to know your readers

You may be lucky to work in an organization that keeps detailed customer/user profiles. If so, absorb them. But if your organization is like most, the profiles are either non-existent, or so general that you can't picture a typical reader in your mind. If this is the case, there are several ways you can figure out who your readers are:

- Talk to your customer support operators; better yet, talk to the customers yourself by spending time answering the phones.
- Talk to customers at trade shows, conventions, or focus group meetings. Ask them about their interests, their job tasks, goals, what they look for when exploring a web site, etc.
- Review any online bulletin boards that your customers use to post questions about your organization.

Write for a single reader

Once you have some information about your readers, picture in your mind one person who will read your content. Ask yourself what her education level is, her personal interests. Is she savvy about your product or service, or is she a newbie who's visiting your site to learn information? Now pretend you are writing just for that person. It's easier to write for a single person you can clearly see than a faceless mass of people.

What all web readers have in common

One thing to keep in mind about all web readers is that they're looking for information, not fluff. They don't like having their time wasted with long passages of text filled with hype that communicates nothing.

2. Organize your content logically

Create a list of main points

Good planning results in logical content organization. A builder wouldn't lay the foundation of a new house without first having a blueprint in hand, so neither should you begin writing web content without creating an outline. It doesn't have to be fancy: a simple bullet point list of the main points of your web page will do. The goal is to break your content into smaller sections that make it easier for you to handle.

Organize the points into a logical format

Now that you have the main points of your web page, you can organize them into a logical format. Some types of content have typical formats. For example, an online software user's guide usually has an introduction, sections on how to operate the software, and a troubleshooting section. More often you'll have to write content that does not have a typical format. Below are some suggestions on how to organize your web content.

Alphabetical order

Use alphabetical order for long lists, such as course descriptions or a directory of instructors.

Questions/Answers

Sometimes called "frequently asked questions" or "FAQs," this organization method is common for troubleshooting sections, or content regarding a complex process. For example:

How do I register for a class?

You can register for a class by filling out the application in the brochure mailed to you, or you can [register online](#).

The question is asked from the reader's point of view, and then answered in the text below the question. The blue, underlined text is a link to a hypothetical online registration form (we'll discuss the proper usage of links later in this guide).

Pyramid

The pyramid style is commonly used in newspapers. It places the most important content at the top of the article, with the least important at the bottom. This format can be used on home pages, press releases, journal articles, memos, and "About" pages.

List

The guide you're reading now is an example of the list style. It describes in list format the "ten steps toward effective web writing." Readers like the list style because it's an intuitive way to inform them of exactly what they're going to read.

Deductive order

The content starts with a general statement, and then is followed by evidence to support that statement. Many scientific and argumentative articles are organized this way.

3. Make your text scannable

According to web usability expert Jacob Nielsen, 79% of web readers do not read web content word-for-word -- they **scan** the page for items that interest them. Here are several ways to make your web content "scannable."

Use meaningful sub-headings

Your headings and sub-headings are the first things that draw your reader's eye. Make your headings give readers advance notice of what's in the body text underneath. This helps them figure out whether they should spend time reading your text, or if they can skip it.

It's okay to be clever with your headings, but don't make them too cute. Headlines that don't reveal the content of your body text make your readers have to work to decipher the content, making it harder for them to scan your text.

Use bulleted/numbered lists

Another thing readers scan for are bulleted or numbered lists. Lists enable readers to skim through a series to find the one point they're looking for.

Old	New
There are plenty of activities for students available outside the classroom, such as student organizations, athletics, fine arts, charitable work, and the student newspaper.	Student activities outside the classroom include: <ul data-bbox="857 1581 1138 1808" style="list-style-type: none">• Student organizations• Athletics• Fine arts• Charitable work• Student newspaper

Highlight key words/phrases

Highlight key words or phrases either by using **bold text** or by giving them a different color (remember to use the same color consistently throughout your site). But don't overdo highlighting. Lots of bolded/colored text makes it hard for your reader's eyes to focus on the rest of the content. One or two words per paragraph are enough.

Avoid using *italics*, ALL CAPS, or underlined text to highlight words. Italics and ALL CAPS are difficult to read on the screen, and underlined text implies a link to another web page (more on links later in this guide).

<p>Old</p> <p>The university boasts some of the nation's best athletic facilities for its varsity teams. The past two decades have seen university athletics experience a tremendous growth, both in terms of number of programs and number of facilities.</p>	<p>New</p> <p>The university boasts some of the nation's best athletic facilities for its varsity teams. The past two decades have seen university athletics experience a tremendous growth, both in terms of number of programs and number of facilities.</p>
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Left-align body text

For typical body content, use left-aligned, un-justified text (sometimes called a "ragged right" margin). Left-aligned text without justification is much easier to read on a computer screen than justified text. Most screens can't cope with the subtle spaces inserted between the letters and words of justified text. As a result, justified text looks uneven and breaks up the shape of the word, making it harder to scan the content (we tend to recognize words based on their overall shape, not their actual letters).

4. Write in chunks

Long passages of text intimidate and bore readers. Therefore, break your text into smaller sections, or chunks, that are easier to read.

“Chunky” text consists of small paragraphs of 2 to 4 sentences organized around a particular idea. Each paragraph typically follows the journalistic pyramid model, where the most important point is at the beginning, with supporting text towards the end. Write a meaningful sub-heading for each chunk to help readers scan your content.

Old	New
<p>Not many web designers understand how standards-based design can save their clients money. We do. We know it reduces costly maintenance and bandwidth charges. And our web sites use a common style sheet across all pages. For example, this enables you to increase the font-size of the text on every page of your site -- even sites with hundreds of pages -- by changing one value on a single style sheet. Common style sheets make your site easy to update, reducing the time spent on costly upgrades. Many web site hosting companies will charge you extra fees if your site gets too many hits above your allotted bandwidth. We can reduce these fees by doing away with eye candy graphics that add no value to your site, and writing lean markup code that doesn't bog down your server each time customers open your site.</p>	<p>Save money with standards-based design Not many web designers understand how standards-based design can save their clients money. We do. We know it reduces costly maintenance and bandwidth charges.</p> <p>Cheaper, quicker upgrades Our web sites use a common style sheet across all pages. For example, this enables you to increase the font-size of the text on every page of your site -- even sites with hundreds of pages -- by changing one value on a single style sheet. Common style sheets make your site easy to update, reducing the time spent on costly upgrades.</p> <p>Reduce extra bandwidth charges Many web site hosting companies will charge you extra fees if your site gets too many hits above your allotted bandwidth. We can reduce these fees by doing away with eye candy graphics that add no value to your site, and writing lean markup code that doesn't bog down your server each time customers open your site.</p>

5. Write concise text

Eliminate 50% of your print text

When writing web content, try to write half the amount of text you'd normally write for print. Since people find it harder to read a computer screen, they're impatient to get to the information they want. More text means more time spent reading through passages that are of no use to them.

But don't be ambiguous

Be careful not to eliminate so much text that you remove the meaning of your content, or make it ambiguous. Make your content concise by writing fewer words, not by saying less.

Eliminate fluff

The best way to write concise web content is to eliminate fluff. This includes "hype" words, clichés, unnecessary technical jargon, and excess adjectives. Fluff occurs when the writer writes to impress rather than communicate.

Old	New
As the world's premier exporter of champion-quality football jerseys, it is our extreme pleasure to announce another superior breakthrough in sports uniform apparel – the Super Jersey! The Super Jersey combines the high-tech fabric called Rylon, which resists ugly grass stains and unseemly tears, with the value of a cheaper price than any of those imitation jerseys. It's a fantastic product that is guaranteed to make your head spin!	The Super Jersey combines the stain- and tear-resistant fabric Rylon with a new low price, giving you the best sports apparel value on the market.

Don't use a big word when a smaller will do

Only use a large word when it precisely conveys the idea you want to communicate. Otherwise, use the smallest word possible. Fancy language frustrates readers because some may have to stop and puzzle out its meaning. Write in plain, ordinary text, and your readers will love you.

Old	New
Utilize	Use
Intimidation	Threat
Unequivocal	Clear
Conglomeration	Variety

6. Write informally

The web is an informal medium, so readers expect you to write in an informal style. Write conversationally, as if you were talking directly to your readers. When appropriate use small amounts of humor.

However, do not use puns or clever metaphors (unless, of course, that is the goal of your site). The web is an international medium, and international readers may not get the pun, or they might take your metaphors literally.

7. Simplify your sentences

Using simple sentences is another way to write meaningful web content while keeping your text concise.

Reduce *that*, *who*, and *which* clauses

Readers understand one idea at a time. Clouding your sentences with too many *that*, *who*, or *which* clauses makes your content harder to read. Your readers are cruising along, thinking they've understood the subject of your sentence, when you abruptly introduce a new idea. They must now put the original idea in reserve as they try to understand the smaller idea.

There are several strategies for repairing clause-ridden content:

- Remove the clause and make it a separate sentence.
- Move the clause to the end of the sentence. Readers will understand it better because it won't distract them from the idea of the main sentence.
- Use a semicolon to separate the clauses.

<p>Old Don't put the newspaper by the fire.</p> <p>It would not be wise to prevent an ambulance from passing you by driving slow in front of it.</p>	<p>New Put the newspaper in the recycle bin.</p> <p>Pull over when you seen an ambulance approaching.</p>
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8. Use links correctly

Use consistent link styles

Links are usually displayed as underlined text, or as text of a different color or background than the body text. However you identify a link, always use the same style consistently throughout your web site.

Describe what readers will get if they click

Word your links so that they give readers enough information about the page to which you're linking. Tim Berners-Lee, inventor of the web, says about links, "When you make a reference, qualify it with a clue to allow some people to skip it."

<p>Old <u>Next</u></p> <p><u>See also</u></p>	<p>New <u>Next: A primer on writing for the web</u></p> <p>See also:</p> <p><u>Rule #1 – Know your audience</u></p> <p><u>Rule #2 – Organization is the key</u></p>
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Make the link the emphatic element

When embedding links into your text, always make the link the emphatic element of your sentence. The emphatic element is usually the main point.

<p>Old The new course will provide 60% more knowledge to students. <u>Click here</u> for further survey results.</p>	<p>New The new course will provide 60% more knowledge to students, according to <u>survey results</u>.</p>
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Link to sources outside your site

Linking to pages outside your site shows that you're confident about what you write. Your readers are more likely to believe you if you link to another site that supports your statements.

Before Once, while I was in Antarctica, a penguin flew past my snow mobile.	After Once, while I was in Antarctica, a penguin flew past my snow mobile. Penguins can't fly, you say? According to this scientific study by Discover Magazine , it's not as crazy as it sounds.
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9. Use graphics, charts, and tables to illustrate points

Use visual elements to support your text. People usually remember 10% of what they read and 30% of what they see.

Use this... Photo/illustration Table Pie chart Bar chart	To... Show what something looks like Compare data Show how something is divided Compare quantities
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A warning about photos/graphics

Only place graphics/photos if they add value to your site. They **must** serve a purpose. For example, they should show people using your product or service, or they should provide information that your page would lack if they weren't there. Graphics that fail to add value to your site distract readers from the all-important content.

Before inserting a graphic, ask yourself if your site would be lacking in some way if the graphic were not there. If your site conveys its point just fine without the graphic, you probably shouldn't use it.

10. Update your content frequently

The web is a living medium. Readers expect the timeliest information available about your organization's products and services. To keep your visitors coming back, it's a good idea to update your site frequently, at least once a week.

You need not update the content of your **entire** site each week, but you should at least have a section on your home page where readers can find recent news/information about your organization, or the industry in which your organization does business.

Update the content on your entire site often, or it'll grow stale. Worse, it'll become inaccurate. Remember to check things like online calendars, course schedules, and product descriptions for outdated information.

For more information

Much of the information for this guide came from the following sources:

- "Hot Text: Web Writing that Works" by Jonathon and Lisa Price. New Riders, 2002.
- "The Online Copywriter's Handbook" by Robert W. Bly. McGraw Hill, 2002.
- "How Users Read on the Web" by Jacob Nielson.
<http://www.useit.com/alertbox/9710a.html>
- "The Elements of Style (Third Edition)" by William Strunk and E.B. White. Allyn and Bacon, 1979.