Writing for the Web

Web sites are based on words. Good ones make **efficient** use of words, while poor ones don't. If our Web site is poorly written, we are not communicating effectively. We do not want to waste users' time or provide poor customer service.

Clear, concise thinking

Good writing is **clear thinking**. It keeps to the facts, is easy to read and understand, and contains information relevant to the reader. It is effortless reading that makes you want to read more. It is clear and concise, using short sentences and simple words.

Writing actively

The Internet is an **active medium**, unlike print, which is a passive medium. Web users only care about **solving their problems** quickly. Write in the **active voice** as much as possible and avoid the passive voice except when it may be necessary in headings.

ACTIVE: The state has rejected all bids for the Orange County Fairgrounds.
PASSIVE: All bids for the Orange County Fairgrounds have been rejected by the state.

- In the first sentence the **action** is contained in the first four words, whereas in the second it is further back.

Minimalism

Don't waste words on generic, feel-good information – get to the point. The average web user only spends a few (usually no more than five) seconds scanning a page, we should make their job **easier** by spelling it out as **simply as possible**.

Some things to keep in mind:

- Web content should have roughly 50% of the word count of its print equivalent.
- Keep content **fresh**. Outdated information undermines the credibility of a Web site.
- Don't assume the users have **read the preceding pages**. Users can enter from many points such as links on this or other websites, or searches.
- Avoid **acronyms**; assume users are visiting your site with no background information.

How people view web pages

The F-shaped patterns in the graphic above are the results of an eye-tracking study. Red areas indicate most frequently seen areas of the page. Generally readers are drawn to the biggest heading (or image) at the top of the page and then scan through the rest; these scans generally pick out key words or figures the reader has an interest in.

- 79% of users **scan** a web page instead of reading it word-for-word.
- Reading from computer screens is 25% **slower** than from paper.

Simple tips for Web writing

Writing for a Website is different than writing for print. In most cases**, re-typing information directly from a brochure or other document does not produce good web content**. If necessary, documents, brochures, etc. can be uploaded or archived.

- Always use the **Associated Press** (AP) style guide.
- **Most important** information should appear **first,** followed by the second-most, etc.

- Instead of spelling them out, use **numbers** when dealing with statistics (1, 35, 198) – the eye is drawn to them quicker (This is a break from AP style which would have you spell out anything below 10).
- **Boldface** key information-carrying words in a passage. This will help readers find information even quicker.
- **Omit** unnecessary words. Every word should serve a purpose.

Headings

Headings are almost always the **first thing** a reader's eye is drawn to (the only thing that trumps headings are images, which are discussed below). Every page should have at least **one** heading that informs users what they are reading about.

- Use **headings** to separate unrelated passages.
- Headings should "sell and tell" – convince users what follows is important and inform them of what it is.
- Begin headings with **action** words. Users generally only scan the first three words.

BAD: Bids for Orange County Fairgrounds have been rejected by DGS acting Director Ron Diedrich
BETTER: DGS acting Director Ron Diedrich rejects all bids for Orange County Fairgrounds
BEST: State rejects bids for Orange County Fairgrounds

Paragraphs

- The first sentence should **summarize** the paragraph.
- Use one **idea** per paragraph.
- Paragraphs should be no more than 3-5 lines long.
- Be **consistent**; use the same term for the same thing.
- Use **bulleted lists** (like this one) where applicable.
- **Avoid** underlining text. Users assume underlined text signifies a hyperlink.

Reading Level

Web site usability experts recommend writing at a sixth grade level on a main page and an eighth grade level on sub-pages. This doesn't mean dumbing down all of your content to monosyllabic words; it does mean that you should be mindful that not everyone is familiar with government or legal jargon, nor does every web user have a dictionary handy.

Test your text at: Simple Measure of Goobledygook, new window.
<http://www.harrymclaughlin.com/SMOG.htm>

Links

It is always beneficial to give context to the information you are providing. Therefore, linking to information in other places (in our Website or outside) is sometimes necessary. These may be within the written text or a bulleted list.

- Avoid **punctuation** around or in a link. Readers may ignore it and the entire link may become invisible.
- Try to **embed** links within passages; the underlined blue text will indicate users can click through: "All approved supplements and errata to the 2007 edition Title 24 are available online at the Building Standards Commission Website."
- Don't use "**click here**" for hyperlinks.
- Use **descriptive** words that make sense when viewed within a list of only links, such as Download Usability Checklist.
- If the link opens a **pdf**, let the user know inside the link, such as Accessibility Checklist (pdf) .
- All **external** links must open a new window.

Visual Aides

Sometimes words just aren't enough. Visual aides like graphics, pictures and flow charts can enhance a web user's experience and make information more palatable to them.

- Include **flowcharts** and process diagrams and unique captions identifying them.
- Use **screen captures** if they can help the user understand how a product or service works.
- Add an explanatory note that a screen is the result of a user action, if it is unclear that the graphic is **interactive**.
- Every photo should have a **caption** with a brief description what is going on in the photo.
- When using large graphics, provide a small preview and link to the larger graphic.

Other resources

For more information on clear writing for the Web, visit:

- PlainLanguage.gov, new window
- Webcontent.gov, new window
- Gerry McGovern.com, new window