Writing for the Web is Distinctly Different than Academic Writing

When writing for the web, using plain language allows users to find what they need, understand what they have found, and then use it to meet their needs. It should also be actionable, findable, and shareable.

It's important to understand how what you are writing fits into the overall content strategy, what the content lifecycle entails, and who is involved in the process.

Want visitors to stay on your web long enough to take action? Here's a short summary of how text must be presented in order for your online visitors to read it:

1. Less is more! Be concise.
2. Break documents into separate topics.
3. Use even shorter paragraphs than on paper.
4. Use short lists and bullets to organize information.
5. Use even more lists than on paper.
6. Use even more headings with less under each heading.
7. Questions often make great headings.
8. Present each topic or point separately, and use descriptive section headings.
9. Keep the information on each page to no more than two levels.
10. Make liberal use of white space so pages are easy to scan.
11. Write (especially page titles) using the same words your readers would use when doing a web search for the info.
12. Don.t assume your readers have knowledge of the subject or have read related pages on your site. Clearly explain things so each page can stand on its own.
13. Never use "click here" as a link — link language should describe what your reader will get if they click the link.
14. Eliminate unnecessary words.

Readability and Tone

The content of your site should be easy to read. Write in a conversational style. Search out and destroy jargon, and avoid obscure acronyms. Even when your audience is internal, it's important to be aware that other audiences, such as prospective students, are often viewing to get a sense of "what it's really like".

Online readers expect a personal, upbeat tone. They find bureaucratic writing so offensive and out-of-place that they simply ignore the message it's trying to convey.

Write in active voice instead of passive voice (Ex: "Tim taught the class", instead of "the class was taught by Tim"). Active voice is naturally less bureaucratic.

Scanability

Keep your visitors' interest by making headlines and navigation obvious and relevant.

Put the most important content on your page in the first paragraph, so that readers scanning your pages will not miss your main idea.

Chunk your content. Cover only one topic per paragraph.

Choose lists over paragraphs when possible.

Use appropriate text formatting, such as bolding and italics to draw the eye to important points. But don't overdo it—emphasizing nearly everything dilutes the effect.

Site viewers tend to move through a Web site in a non-linear, unpredictable manner, making web

pages more like newspapers than books. They can enter a site from any page, and move between pages as they choose. As such, it's best to create content for each page that is not dependent on other sections. Related links can help to guide the reader to background or explanatory information.

Length

A page should have at the very least one paragraph of content.

Be concise. Remember that your audience is increasingly reading your content on mobile phones. Web readers don't mind scrolling, but you shouldn't make it a mile long! Write short paragraphs and minimize unnecessary words. A length of 300-700 words is reasonable for an average page.

If you have a print document that you want to bring to the web remember this very simple rule: a page on the web should be half the length of a similar print document.

What do you do if you have more than 700 words? Simple: look at the architecture of that content and break it down into sections, leading people to specific portions of the text as much as possible.

Links

Don't create links that use the phrase "click here." Write the sentence as you normally would, and place the link anchor on the word or words that best describe the additional content you are linking to. Between one and five words is the ideal length for an effective hypertext link.

Descriptive link text helps all site visitors, but it is particularly important for those using a screen reader. These users often scan through a page's links, so multiple links that read "Click here" are not helpful.

Search Engine Optimized Writing

In order to achieve maximum search engine visibility, you need to think like a search engine when writing.

Search engines put the text of your page into a database. When a site viewer conducts a search, the database is queried to identify all the pages that include those words on the page and/or in the links pointing to that page.

Once pages have been identified, search engines order the results according to relevance. Relevance can be determined based on dozens and dozens of criteria, such as keyword prominence (how often your keywords appear on a page, and where they appear).

In order to rank well:

- Include keywords your audience is likely to be searching for.
- Write useful, clear, well organized content.
- Do not duplicate content, but link to it where appropriate, using keywords. If links to your page include the words that the site viewer searched for, your ranking will improve.

Why it Matters

People read differently online than they do when they read print materials -- web users typically scan for information. In a study of online reading behavior Site exit disclaimer, Jakob Nielsen found that "on the average webpage, users have time to read at most 28% of the words during an average visit; 20% is more likely".

Identify Your Users' Top Tasks

People come to your website with a specific task in mind. When developing your site's content, keep your users' tasks in mind and write to ensure you are helping them accomplish those tasks.

If your website doesn't help them complete that task, they'll leave. Conduct market research, perform a task analysis and other types of user research, and analyze metrics to better understand what users are looking to do.

Knowing your users' top tasks can help you identify:

- Content to feature on your homepage or landing pages
- Page headers and sub headers
- A logical structure to each page's content

How to Write User-Friendly Content

It's important to target your audience when writing for the web. By knowing who you are writing for, you can write at a level that will be meaningful for them. Use the personas you created while designing the site to help you visualize who you are writing for.

Use the words your users use. By using keywords that your users use, you will help them understand the copy and will help optimize it for search engines.

Chunk your content. Chunking makes your content more scannable by breaking it into manageable sections.

Front-load the important information. Use the journalism model of the "inverted pyramid." Start with the content that is most important to your audience, and then provide additional details.

Use pronouns. The user is "you." The organization or government agency is "we." This creates cleaner sentence structure and more approachable content.

Use active voice. "The board proposed the legislation" not "The regulation was proposed by the board."

Use plain language. Learn more about the government's plain language standard and find a checklist to help you in your projects at: www.plainlanguage.gov/

Use short sentences and paragraphs. The ideal standard is no more than 20 words per sentence, five sentences per paragraph. Use dashes instead of semi-colons or, better yet,

break the sentence into two. It is ok to start a sentence with "and," "but," or "or" if it makes things clear and brief.

Use bullets and numbered lists. Don't limit yourself to using this for long lists—one sentence and two bullets is easier to read than three sentences.

Use clear headlines and subheads. Questions, especially those with pronouns, are particularly effective.

Use images, diagrams, or multimedia to visually represent ideas in the content. Videos and images should reinforce the text on your page.

Use white space. Using white space allows you to reduce noise by visually separate information.

It's also important to create an editorial calendar. You can encourage visitors to return to your site by keeping your content fresh and up-to-date, especially when working with blogs, social media, or dynamic content websites.

Testing Your Document's Readability

Use Microsoft Word's Readability Statistics feature—part of the Spelling & Grammar check—to measure your progress as you write and edit copy. Try to make your reading ease number go up and your grade level go down. You can improve your readability by using active voice and short words, sentences, and paragraphs.

Left

Left aligned text works because it mirrors the way we read – left to right. It is easy to see where each line begins and ends

Center

Centered text should be used sparingly and small text blocks

Right

Right aligned text can be difficult to use effectively and should be used for small text frames and citing quotes and pictures

---