Writing for the web

Writing for the web is very different from other writing. Users read information online differently than information in print. Online readers coming to a site after an online search often don't know if a website will meet their needs. If they do not find the information they are looking for, they will deem the site of little value, no matter how well it is designed or how easy to use. You can create clear, usable content by writing for varying levels of reader interest. Your goal should be to give all readers their desired level of information as quickly as possible.

The following tips apply to writing content for web pages. Be sure to take these best practices into account when writing content for your client website.

Online reading behavior

Studies have discovered the following behaviors among online users:

• They judge websites in a fraction of a second.

• They scan content, hunting for the information they're after. They don't read word-for-word.

• They read more slowly from screens than from print.

• Distractions and competition from online messaging, Facebook, and so on make it hard to keep users' attention.

• Because so much information is available online, users determine quickly if content is worth reading.

Knowing your audience

To write effectively, you need to know your audience:

• Determine a range of interest levels among your audience and try to write for that range of interest (none to some, little to strong, only strong, and so on).

• Create a user persona for each kind of user to help you determine how to get their attention.

• Write as if you are speaking to your audience in person.

• Consider users of various reading levels.

• Make sure all content is accessible.

Writing guidelines

Guidelines for effective communication:

• Use clear, simple, familiar language.

• Avoid jargon, acronyms, and abbreviations.

• Use an active and objective voice.

• Be direct and concise, getting quickly important points.

• Put the conclusion first so readers know what to expect from the content.

Chunk content

• *Chunk* means a manageable bit—a small piece of information a user can easily find and understand.

• Bold important words or phrases.

• Use lists.

- Keep content short.
- Use fragments or phrases instead of prose style. If you can cut a word, cut it.

Organizing page content

Titles

The title is the first piece of information a user scans. Make it clear, inviting, and meaningful.

Headings and subheadings

- Headings should be short, direct, and powerful.
- Subheadings should be descriptive, so users easily learn what each section is about. Use subheadings frequently (every few paragraphs) to keep user moving through content in easy chunks.

Sentences and paragraphs

- Shorter is better.
- Sentences should be no longer than about 20 words.
- Each sentence should be limited to one idea.
- Paragraphs should have no more than about 6 sentences.
- Each paragraph should be limited to one or two ideas.

Lists

- Lists are easy to scan because content is vertical.
- Content presented in lists is usually more succinct.

Links

- Link to related information.
- Use descriptive link text so users know where they are going.

Design elements

- Use callouts, bold, and italics to make text easier to scan.
- Substitute pictures and other visual elements for text when appropriate.

Writing for mobile devices

- Reading on a mobile device is more difficult than on a desktop computer.
- When writing for mobile users, focus attention on the essential content.
- Defer secondary content to secondary pages.
- Writing for mobile readers requires even harsher editing than writing for the web. Mobile use implies less patience for filler copy.
- When in doubt, leave it out.

Best practices

- Analyze and emulate great web writing.
- Provide accurate descriptions and keywords for search engines.
- Use web writing guidelines when re-purposing print documents for the web.

- Create a style guide.

- Test your content:

- Make sure all links work and are relevant.

- Make sure all titles and summaries provide information about the contents of the page.

- Read content from the view of your defined personas and make sure all users will find information quickly and accurately.