Writing for the web
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Writing for the web is often writing to be found. People come to web sites to satisfy goals, to do tasks, and to get answers to questions. They come for information, for the content. They don’t read much, especially before they get to the page that has the information they want. Even on information pages, they skim and scan before they start to read. They want to read only enough to meet their needs. Think of the web as a conversation started by a busy web user. Answer people’s questions throughout your web content, not only in sections called “Frequently Asked Questions or FAQs”. Write so that busy people can grab the information they need quickly.

1.1 Scannability
Users scan text and pick out keywords, sentences, and paragraphs of interest while skipping over those parts of text they care less about.

1.2 Why users scan
Reading from the computer screens is tiring for the eyes and about 25 % slower than from paper. The web is a user-driven medium where users feel that they have to move around. Users move between many pages and try to pick the most interesting/relevant segments of each.

1.3 F-shaped pattern for reading web content
Eye-tracking visualizations show that users often read web pages in an F-shaped pattern: two horizontal stripes followed by a vertical stripe.

F for fast. That’s how users read your content. In a few seconds, their eyes move at amazing speeds across your website’s words in a pattern that’s very different from what you learned in school.

Users first read in a horizontal movement, usually across the upper part of the content area. This initial element forms the F’s top bar. Next, users move down the page a bit and then read across in a second horizontal movement that typically covers a shorter area than the previous movement. This additional element forms the F’s lower bar. Finally, users scan the content’s left side in a vertical movement. Sometimes this is a fairly slow and systematic scan that appears as a solid stripe on an eye-tracking heatmap. At other times, users move faster, creating a spottier heatmap. This last element forms the F’s stem.

Obviously, users’ scan patterns do not always include exactly three parts. Sometimes users will read across a third part of the content, making the pattern look more like an E than an F. Other times they’ll only read across once, making the pattern look like an inverted L (with the cross-bar at the top). Generally, however, reading patterns roughly resemble an F, though the distance between the top and lower bar varies.
1.4 Implications of the F pattern
The F pattern’s implications for web design are clear and show the importance of following the guidelines for writing for the web instead of repurposing print content:
– Users won’t read your text thoroughly in a word-by-word manner. Exhaustive reading is rare, especially when prospective customers are conducting their initial research to compile a shortlist of vendors.
– The first two paragraphs must state the most important information.
– Start subheads, paragraphs, and bullet points with information-carrying words that users will notice when scanning down the left side of your content in the final stem of their F-behavior. They’ll read the third word on a line much less often than the first two words.
Effective content writing is one of the most critical aspects of all web design. Most users scan online content, rather than carefully reading, so you must optimize content for scannability and craft it to convey maximum information in few words.

2.1 Write for scannability
- Structure articles with two, or even three, levels of headlines.
- Use the typeface bold rather than italic for keyword highlighting. Boldface is typically the best way to highlight words.
- The typeface italic can be used to make figure captions or emphasized sentences or phrases stand out. Do not use it for large blocks of text, since italic typefaces are slower to read online.
- Colored text or colored backgrounds can also be used for highlighting, but don’t use blue for words. That color is reserved for hyperlinks.
- The hyperlinks also stand out by virtue of being colored, so they should be written to do double duty as highlighted keywords.
- Highlight only key information-carrying words. Avoid highlighting entire sentences or long phrases since a scanning eye can only pick up two (or at most three) words at a time.
- Bulleted and numbered lists slow down the scanning eye and can draw attention to important points.
- Each paragraph should contain one main idea; use a second paragraph for a second idea, since users tend to skip any second point as they scan over the paragraph.

2.2 Be succinct—break down walls of words
- Write no more than 50% of the text you would have used to cover the same material in a print publication.
- Don’t expect users to read long continuous blocks of text; instead, use short paragraphs, subheadings, and bulleted lists.
- Relegate long and detailed background information to a secondary page.
- Start with a short conclusion, then gradually add detail. Present the most important material up front (inverted pyramid).
- Use simple sentence structure.

2.3 Make the structure of your information clear
Make the structure of your information clear by giving similar elements the same design and important elements more visual weight (using size, space, or color). It enables your readers to understand your content at a glance and speeds up the process of finding what they need.

2.4 Break your content into small, easy-to-scan portions
Break your content into small paragraphs or, even better, write your content specifically for web reading in the first place. It is easier to read text on a screen when it is in small, easy-to-scan portions. Web text paragraphs should be as short as possible, or even be reduced to bulleted lists.

2.5 Avoid redundant content
Repeating identical items, such as categories or links, to emphasize their importance actually deduces their impact. Redundant items also clutter the page; all items lose impact because they are competing with so many elements. In order to feature something prominently, feature it clearly in one place. On the other hand, redundant content can help people if you repeat items that belong in multiple categories or you include links to the same page but offer synonyms that represent words your users use to describe the content.
2.6 Headlines and titles
A headline is micro-content, an ultra short abstract of its associated macro-content.
– Use meaningful headlines: tell the user what the page or section is about.
– Use 40 to 60 characters (two to six words) to make it absolutely clear what the page is about.
– Users often look only at the highlighted headlines and skip most summaries.

Don’t label a clearly defined area of the page if the content is sufficiently self-explanatory. For example, it is usually not necessary to label the main news headline of the day because the size and placement indicate its role. Similarly, if you have boxed area where you feature a product, it’s probably not necessary to give it a generic title such as “Featured Product”.

2.7 Optimizing titles for quick scanning
– Move information-carrying terms toward the beginning.
– Start with a word that will match the user’s needs when scanning a menu or listing of titles, eg: not Welcome to MyCompany but MyCompany.
– Since some title listings are alphabetized (in alphabetical order), do not use the articles A, An, and The at the beginning of a title.

In a nutshell
– The headline has to stand on its own.
– It has to make sense when the rest of the content is unavailable.
– Write in plain language: no puns, no “cute” or “clever” headlines.
– Make the first word an important, information-carrying one. Eg, start with the name of the company, person, or concept discussed in an article.

2.8 Captions
– The caption uniquely identifies the illustration or table. For example, do not give the same name to the caption as you have given to a head on the same page or another page.
– Caption illustrations except when the context is so clear that captions would be redundant.
– Don’t number illustrations sequentially by chapter, section, or the like. If a screen capture has more than one illustration to which you must refer, use simple numbering (Figure 1, Figure 2). If you follow the “one topic per screen” guideline, however, figure numbers usually won’t be necessary.
– Don’t include figure captions unless you need them or have a lot of conceptual or reference material.

2.9 Capital letters
Don’t set type in all capital letters. All CAPITAL LETTERS are harder to read than uppercase and lowercase letters In addition, it makes it look like you’re shouting your message, which is just rude.
2.10 Italics
Don’t set more than a few words in italics. Most browsers just slant the regular text font to achieve an “italic”. The result is often nearly unreadable, especially for large quantities of text at small sizes.

2.11 Capital, bold, and italics
Don’t set text in all CAPITAL, BOLD, AND ITALICS. This is too much.

2.12 Words that need to go together
Use non-breaking spaces between words in phrases that need to go together in order to be scannable and understood. Because there are many possibilities for where text breaks depending on the user’s screen resolution, monitor size, window size, browser version, and so forth, forcing certain phrases to stay together can maintain the integrity and logic of the content.

2.13 Line breaks
Don’t insert line breaks unless you really mean them. Text wraps differently for each user, depending on the browser’s default text-size setting and the width of the browser window.

2.14 Abbreviations, initialisms, and acronyms
Spell out abbreviations, initialisms, and acronyms, and immediately follow them by the abbreviation, in the first instance. This is helpful for all users, especially for anyone using a screen reader. Abbreviations that have become widely used words, such as DVD, are exceptions to this guideline. Especially avoid using unexplained abbreviations as navigation links.

2.15 Avoid exclamation marks
Exclamation marks don’t belong in professional writing, and they especially don’t belong on a homepage. Exclamation marks look chaotic and loud—don’t yell at users.

2.16 Lists
– You can include a greater number of lists on a web page than on a printed paper page
– Use numbered lists when the order of entries is important
– Use unnumbered lists whenever the sequence of the entries is not important
– Limit the number of items in a single list to no more than nine
– Generally, limit lists to no more than two levels: primary and secondary

2.17 Single-item categories and single-item bulleted lists
Avoid single-item categories and single-item bulleted lists. It’s overkill to categorize one item, and things that don’t fit into existing categories can signify a need to rewrite or reorganize the content.

2.18 Linking
Links give the user’s eyes something to rest on while scanning through an article.
– Don’t use a hypertext link if the information can be succinctly presented on the current page.
– Don’t mention that you are providing links at all.
– Use a description of the information to be found in the link, or perhaps the link address.
– Use hyperlinks to provide supplemental information like definitions of terms and abbreviations, reference information, and background reading.
– Cluster cross-references under a “See also” (or similar) heading where appropriate. Generally, such lists of cross-references are easiest to read if they include only headings or titles with a few words of explanation.
– Turn only the most important information-carrying terms into links.
– A link should be no more than two to four words long.
– If too many words are used for a link, the user cannot pick up its meaning by scanning.
– Make sure the most important links will be visible without scrolling.

2.19 Terms to avoid

Writing well for the web means taking advantage of the options the web offers, but at the same time, not calling attention to the web.

“Click here,” “follow this link,” and “this web site” are just a few self-referential terms to avoid.

Generally, if words or phrases are specific to web use, then they are probably words to avoid. A good test of web-term overuse is to print the page out, read it, and ask yourself if it makes as much sense on paper as it does on screen.

Another term to avoid is “log on to”; simply use “log in as a user” or “log in for more details”. Do not, however, use “User log in”. Here, the correct usage will be “User login”, “use your login”.

2.20 Use action phrase headings for instructions

Many of questions that users bring to web sites are “How do I …?”. If you have only one such question with many other questions on a web page, it's fine to keep that as a question.

However, if you have a series of questions, all of which would start “How do I …?” people may have a hard time finding the one they want.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How do I set up an account?</th>
<th>Setting up an account</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How do I view my information?</td>
<td>Viewing your information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do I change my information?</td>
<td>Changing your information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do I pay online?</td>
<td>Paying online</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do I get help?</td>
<td>Getting help</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.21 Mandatory tasks

Only use imperative language such as “Enter a City or Zip Code” for mandatory tasks, or qualify the statement appropriately. People are naturally drawn to text that tells them what to do on a site, especially if it is next to a recognized widget, such as an input box or a dropdown menu, and often dutifully follow instructions because they think that they must do what the instructions say.

2.22 Editorial review of web pages

An editor can help you polish the content of your web pages before you release them to the rest of the world by improving the grammar, punctuation, and consistency, and by making content suggestions.

The editor can also serve as your usability tester, so be sure to create a list of any aspects of your web page design or content for which you particularly need feedback.
References