



Fundamentals of Writing for the Web

Writing for the web is not like writing for print, mainly because of the way we read a screen. So by and large, copy you've already written for other marketing literature will probably not work very well on the web, unless you rewrite it.

Which is a pain, but there we are.

SO WHY IS IT DIFFERENT?

We rarely read web pages word by word, from top left to bottom right. If you think about how you look at a website, you tend to scan the page, picking out individual words, headings and sentences to see if it's the sort of thing you're looking for.

People also adopt an F-shaped reading pattern, looking down the left hand side, then across the top, and then into the content. So the way you write your copy needs to reflect how we read it.

WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?

Jakob Nielsen, web usability guru, identifies four ways in which existing text can be adapted to make a website more usable: (a lot of this makes sense for print too).

These are to make it:

- scannable
- concise
- objective
- all 3

MAKE IT SCANNABLE

Summarise.

Put the main points of your document in the first paragraph, so that readers scanning your pages will get the point of the page straightaway.

Inverted Pyramid Structure

Start with the conclusion, a broad stroke, or an overview. Narrow your subject as you go on, giving more and more detail towards the bottom of your page. This is known as the 'inverted pyramid' style of writing. Very detailed background information, or information of interest only to a minority of readers, can be presented on secondary pages, linked from your main page, or in a download.

Highlight Words or Sentences

Hypertext links serve as one form of highlighting; *typeface variations* and **colour** are others.

Use Headings/Sub Headings

It's terribly tempting to use clever or witty headings and these are OK – but in moderation. Unless the heading is clear about what is to follow, the reader might not realise that what they're looking for is right in front of them.

You've also got to bear in mind search engine optimisation; while that will be the subject of another article, headings are a good place to have keywords and keyphrases, especially the first one on the page.

Bullet Lists

A bulleted list is easier to scan than a long list of words or sentences separated by commas. If there's more than 3 items in a list, bullet each item on a separate line.

One Paragraph, One Idea

Readers will skip over any additional ideas if they are not caught by the first few words in the paragraph. So stick to one idea per paragraph, with a nice tight heading that tells what you're going to talk about.

Put the important stuff above the fold

There's been a lot of research into the pros and cons of long or short web pages, none of which is particularly conclusive. Long copy can work brilliantly, as can short and pithy. The main thing everyone agrees on, though, is that important information needs to be 'above the fold' – that is, above the point where a reader will start scrolling.

...AND CONCISE...

Web pages need around half the word count (or less) of conventional writing. You've got to learn to '*Murder your darlings*' – those wonderful, favourite, hard-won paragraphs you come up with are, inevitably, the ones that you need to delete to make your web copy easier to read. Being concise really does improve readability.

Short words and phrases

Try to use short words – things like ‘try’ instead of ‘attempt’; ‘event’ instead of ‘occurrence’; ‘use’ instead of ‘utilize’.

Try also to do the same with phrases: ‘since’ or ‘because’ instead of ‘in view of the fact that’; ‘about’ instead of ‘with reference to’; ‘now’ instead of ‘at this point in time’.

Cut the fat

When you've finished writing, go back and see where you can cut out the fat – any unnecessary words should go. Question every word and see if it could be shorter. Make every sentence as short as you can. (12 – 14 words max.)

...AND OBJECTIVE

People tend not to like marketing speak. Web users are busy: they want to get the straight facts.

Credibility suffers when readers clearly see that the site exaggerates. Too-obvious promotional language forces readers to spend time and effort on filtering out the hyperbole to get at the facts.

The best rule to follow is - **Say NO to adjectives** (well, most of them)

Think about why people come to your site, then say it straight and exactly how it is.

KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

Who are they, what do they want, why are they on your site and what problems do they have that you can solve?

Really understand who your audience is, perhaps imagining them as 'one person', a typical user. When you write, write as though you're talking straight to them. People respond to writing that speaks to them personally.

This was taken from a well-known company's website: *"In the event of a misdemeanour happening you should endeavour to contact us at your earliest convenience".*

Awful isn't it? No-one would ever SAY something like that. You're more likely to say *'If something happens, get in touch straight away.'* So why not write that?

Try to write as you talk - or at least, how you would talk to your different audience sectors.

"Oops, the page you requested isn't here" could suit one sector:
'Sorry - something's gone wrong here" might be better for a different one.

SEARCH ENGINES

The main difference between writing copy for print and copy for a website is that the latter isn't just about your human audience. You've also got to be aware of the search engines, and their importance in helping people to find your site.

Keywords and phrases are what your visitors type in to Google, so you need to use those same phrases and words on your site so the search engines can find it.

Free keyword tools

There are quite a few free keyword tools which will help you find keywords and phrases to suit your product or service. Take a look at

Google:

<https://adwords.google.com/select/KeywordToolExternal>

Wordtracker:

<http://freekeywords.wordtracker.com/>

Keyword Discovery:

<http://www.keyworddiscovery.com/search.html>

SEOBook:

<http://tools.seobook.com/keyword-tools/seobook/>

To really get into the nitty gritty of SEO, you'll need to pay for specialised tools, but these free tools are a good start.

WHAT ELSE?

Consistency

Have an Editorial Style Guide so everyone writes in the same tone of voice

- Capitalisation – is 'Web' spelled with a capital or lowercase W?
- Is the company plural/singular? – 'company name is...' or 'company name are...'
- active/personal language – using 'we' or 'I'

Position

Write in the middle of the screen, which is where people focus and expect to find the core of information.

Line Length

Have about 10 to 12 words on one line. More is hard on the eye, fewer interferes with the flow of your writing.

Alignment

Justify text to the left. Left-aligned text is easier to read than justified text, which in turn is easier to read than centre- or right-aligned text.

Punctuation and Spelling

Always proofread your copy and check that the spelling and punctuation are correct – or get someone else to read through it for you.

TOP 7 IRRITANTS

Legibility problems

Small font, or a low contrast between the font colour and the background.

Non-standard links

Where it's not obvious what's clickable, where non-link text has been underlined so it looks like a link, and there's no differentiation between visited and unvisited links.

Using Flash

A flash intro screen can really put people off, and search engines can't see it anyway.

Content not written for the web

Where an enormous tract of text has been cut and pasted into the web page, with few headings and far too many words for the screen.

Browser incompatibility

You can see a website in one browser but not another.

Cumbersome forms

If too much information is asked for, especially if it's irrelevant, people simply won't bother.

No contact or other company information

Make sure your contact details are on every single page.

AND FINALLY

- Build your site to be as **familiar, intuitive and logical** as possible for new visitors.
- **Headings, subheads and links** need to be descriptive and clear.
- Understand what it is the majority of your **visitors are trying to achieve on your site**. 80% of your visitors will want to complete one of three or four different tasks.
- Make it clear what visitors should do next – have a **clear call to action**.

INTERESTING SITES

www.useit.com

Jakob Nielsen's usability website

www.thegoodwebguide.co.uk

The definitive guide to the best sites on the Internet.

www.angelfire.com/super/badwebs/main.htm

Graphically demonstrates the most common mistakes made by new Web Page designers.

www.webpagesthatsuck.com

learn good web design by looking at bad web design

To summarise

- Make your webcopy scannable, objective and concise
- Use keywords and keyphrases that your visitors use to search for your services.
- Understand your audience and what it is they're trying to achieve on your site
- Have a clear call to action

**You might love writing about your business.
On the other hand, you might not.**

If you'd rather work on your business than write about it, PHarosMarketing offers marketing, copywriting, web content, search engine optimisation and pay-per-click campaigns. The first meeting is free and without obligation, so please call us - we'd love to hear from you.