

Words for the web

How to make life easier for the visitors to your site

How people read from the web

If you've ever compared a company's brochure to their website, you'll find that, although the core of the information is very similar, the copy found on their website will differ in length and structure from the printed brochure. This is because of a number of differences between the ways your audience reads print compared to websites.

With print, you tend to read linearly and sequentially, from one page to the next. With websites, however, the information is fragmented, so the reader will tend to dip in and out of web pages to find the information they require. This means that each page on your site needs to work as a standalone page in its own right. So if they read just one page of your site, they should still have a basic understanding of the context in which it appears.

There's no guarantee that the visitor to your site will start off at your homepage and then branch off to the accompanying sub-pages. If they've come from a search engine, for example, they could have accessed a sub-page looking for something specific, then read any number of pages in any order. In this respect, you must treat the entry and exit points to your site as completely random.

People are much more impatient when reading on the web than they are when they sit down with printed material. Reading from a screen is slower, more uncomfortable and tiring. Because they will probably be sat at a computer reading your site, there's a high chance that they are working, probably under some level of time constraint. They'll be looking to get the information they need and move on as quickly as possible. For this reason, people are likely to scan your copy to find the information they require, rather than taking time to read through every word you have to say and digest it all, as they may do if reading from a company brochure or similar.

If people do take time to read long passages on the web, it's because they're motivated to get every piece of information on that subject and when they're sure they've located information they want.

Creating Usable Content

What makes good web content?

Words on the web work when they:

- Can be grasped quickly
- Make people feel confident
- Are helpful
- Are believable
- Can be accessed by everyone

To achieve these goals, there are a number of practices that you should look to employ.

Tailoring your writing style

More people have access to the Internet than ever before. Particularly in the Western world, it is now common to find an internet-ready computer in most people's homes, schools, libraries and other public places.

There is, however, still a good chance that the person visiting your website won't have a similar reading and writing ability as yourself. For that reason, the copy on your website should be readable by everyone who is likely to visit.

Choose the right words

Because visitors to your site spend less time reading your content than they would if they were reading from print, what you say should be cut to a minimum. Generally, the text should be about 50% less than the number of words you would use for print-based material.

Keep sentence length short and try to avoid using unnecessarily long words. Avoid jargon and marketing speak and only use humour if it suits your target audience. Don't say "As a reminder, please make sure that you remember to take the memory card out of the slot before you shut your computer down" when you could quite easily say "Remove your memory card before you shut down your computer."

Use positive, active language and speak assertively. You won't be able to sell a product or service unless you can speak confidently about it. So, for example, instead of saying "Don't remove the memory card without closing this window," say "Close this window before removing the memory card."

***Use positive, active language
and speak assertively***

Use simple, concise language

Nobody likes overly complicated words or jargon unless it has a real purpose. There's a good chance that if you use complicated words, your audience won't understand them and will feel excluded or disinterested.

By the same token, don't 'dumb down' what you have to say. If you do, you may sound like you're patronising your audience. Think about the product or service you're writing about and try to imagine how your audience would like to be spoken to.

Choose words that will help you write more concisely. For example, instead of saying "Due to the fact that..." just say "Because..." Don't say "At this point in time..." when "Now" will do.

Break content into easily digestible 'chunks'

Journalists use a style of writing called the 'inverted pyramid', where the most important facts go at the beginning of an article and the supporting information goes towards the end. This technique allows editors of their newspaper or magazine to remove less important content without removing the key facts.

This technique works for websites, too. There are no guarantees that your visitor will stick around to hear everything you have to say, so you need to tell them the bits of information that you think they need to hear. So imagine that you are talking to someone from a payphone but your money is about to run out. You want to convey the most crucial pieces of information to the other person before you are cut off, and anything else you can communicate is a bonus. If they choose to ignore one or two of your points, you will have still communicated the most important messages.

If you have a lot of information on a page, consider using an abstract or summary to summarise everything you have to say. This saves the reader time and hassle scanning through each word to find the information they hope to find.

Break your content into smaller chunks of content with separate ideas or topics within each chunk. There's nothing wrong with making paragraph lengths shorter than you would when writing for print, but try to make sure that each one still has its own separate idea.

Break your content into smaller chunks of content with separate ideas within each

Create a visual hierarchy

You need to find a level of consistency throughout your site so that the reader can recognise and follow visual patterns that make them feel comfortable while navigating your site. It's best to devise a set of parameters before you start writing so that you keep it consistent throughout your site as you incorporate additional content.

Break up text with informative and descriptive headlines and sub-headlines. You can emphasise these using blank space, size and weight and create a visual hierarchy for each.

If you have a lot of information that can be broken up, use bulleted lists to make it easier to read.

Write for scannability

Your reader may be looking for something in particular when they visit your site so you will want to make it as easy for them to find it as possible.

- Bold out certain key words/phrases/dates etc to make them stand out.
- Use coloured hyperlinks
- Use headings and sub-headings
- Consider using pull-out quotes if you think someone has something interesting to say about your product or service
- Break up large amounts of text with images
- Make line length around 65-70 characters. This will stop people with wide monitors seeing your text with long lines.

Use bulleted lists to make lots of information easier to read

Elements of usable content

As well as well-written body copy, there are four key elements to a web page that can make life a lot easier for visitors to your site:

- Headlines
- Summaries
- Lists
- Links

Headlines

A good headline is one that:

- Explains why the information is important
- Gives a clear indication of what content they cover
- Is loaded with keywords so that the page is visible on search engines
- Is left aligned for easy scanning

Summaries

Summaries are 'chunks' in themselves but they are also a great way for your audience to find out exactly what you're writing about at a glance. They help provide sufficient information so that the reader can decide whether they want to spend their time reading what you have to say.

Although summaries mainly serve as a blurb or an abstract, they also act as teasers for the page without acting ambiguously.

Lists

Because people spend a lot less time reading online than they do with printed media, it's important to make your information as scannable as possible. Lists - usually in the form of bullets - are a great way to do this. They also the reader an 'at-a-glance' summary of the key points that you wish to communicate.

To give them extra standout from the other text, bold the first keywords in each list.

Numbered lists are particularly good if you're explaining the steps in a procedure or rankings.

Links

If you have any sub-pages on your site, there's a good chance that you'll have a lot of links, so it's important to make sure that using them is as easy for your visitor as possible.

In the first few years of the web, it became the convention to use "click here" and "read more" wherever possible. Since then, however, it has become more practical to explain more about what you get when you click on the link. That way the links themselves become more 'active.' To improve scannability, highlight descriptive phrases such as "download your free report."

Although blue and underlined is the norm for text with a link to another page, there's nothing to stop you using another colour. This can help if you want to fit in with the existing brand colours or identity. Just make sure they stand out enough for the reader to recognise the words as links. If you choose a black link amongst other black text, the reader won't recognise it as a link and will ignore it. Obviously, to prevent confusing your reader, you should ensure that your links are consistent throughout the whole of your site.

There's no convention that says a must be one or two words. Up to eight words is quite acceptable and can help your link stand out within standard text.

Checklist

- Write concisely, using positive and assertive language**
- Adopt a register that everyone reading your website will understand**
- Avoid using jargon or overly technical language**
- Break your content down into visually identifiable chunks**
- Create a visual hierarchy using headers, subheads and lists**
- Use bold, colours and links to make your text easily scannable**

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