Writing & Editing Web Content

A Web Workshop by Wendy Dibean and Todd Bennett
Know the reader

The key characteristics of the online reader are as follows

- They come to the Web wanting to find out something.
- They are impatient.
- They tend to ‘scan-read’—they move quickly through text trying to grab the salient points.
- They don’t particularly like reading online, as screen-based reading is not the most comfortable way to read.
- They don’t like movement on the screen, as this makes text very hard to read.
- They are not simply at your website publication to search for a particular piece of information, they also want your opinion on what they should be reading.
Know the reader

79% of users always scan; only 16% read word-by-word

Reading from computer screens is 25% slower than from paper

Web content should be **50% the size** of its paper equivalent

White Papers re-written according to these guidelines have shown **significant improvements in all metrics (measurements):**

- User Task Time: 180% faster
- User Error: 809% fewer
- Memory (Retention): 100% more
- Subjective satisfaction: 37% higher
- Overall usability: 159% better

Increasing Scannability

Formatting

- Bulleted information stands out for web users. See?
- Never underline information for emphasis (regular web users will assume underlined text to be a link).
- Bold information you want to emphasize instead.

A Note on using links in a body of text

Some usability experts advise that links embedded in body copy open in a new window so that readers do not get lost if they click before they are finished reading.

Use this tool with discretion since users will resent having too many windows opened for them. Also the increasing number of pop-up ads is prompting many web-users to close new windows as soon as they start to open.
**Writing to Be Read**

**Involve the Reader**
- Appeal to the reader's emotions and instincts.
- Use words that drive people to act.
- Capture and keep the reader's interest.
- Appeal to the reader's self-interest.
- Show the facts and proof of your claims.
- Make your reader believe in you.
- Relate and communicate like average people.
- Remember that your HEADLINE is the most important element (choose your words carefully)
- Write, rewrite and rewrite and rewrite and rewrite and rewrite again...

excerpted from chapter 3 of *Taking Your Talent to the Web: A Guide for the Transitioning Designer* by Jeffrey Zeldman.
A good point poorly communicated!

Over time, any functional specialization tends to forget its relationship to the larger social context it was created to work within and serve. Instead, it concentrates on developing an inner sanctum of specialists who talk among themselves in a private language inaccessible to outsiders. Almost without exception, such professionals despise amateurs. Or worse, accord them a patronizing form of faux eye-rolling patience.

from Chapter 1 of the book "Gonzo Marketing: Winning Through Worst Practices" by Christopher Locke. Chapters 1 and 2 can be found in their entirety at www.gonzomarkets.com.

More succinctly:

Experts in any field need to keep the audience in mind. This is especially true on the web because users actively seek information!
Writing to Be Read

Keeping Page Content Independent

Since you cannot control how readers arrive at your web page (Internal search, external search, link from another site, etc.) it is important that content on every page is able to stand alone and communicate effectively.

In a linking medium like the Web, it is critical that web users understand the relevance of the page they’ve arrived at as well where they can go from there.
Writing to Be Read

• Put the most important information at the top.

• The Web is an informal and immediate way to communicate.

• Do not use clever or cute headings; users rely on scanning to pick up the meaning of text.

• Use simple sentence structures.

• Puns do not work for international users.

• The Web is a fluid medium: Update pages

From Writing for the Web by Jakob Nielsen, republished at http://www.sun.com/980713/webwriting/
Writing to Be Read

Use:

- highlighted **keywords** (hypertext links serve as one form of highlighting; typeface variations and color are others)

- meaningful **sub-headings** (not "clever" ones)

- bulleted **lists**

- **one idea** per paragraph (users will skip over any additional ideas if they are not caught by the first few words in the paragraph)

- **half the word count** (or less) than conventional writing

- the inverted pyramid style, starting with the conclusion
Inverted Pyramids:

UM Football Team Wins National Championship!

With a perfect 16-0 record UM beat Nebraska to win the National Championship in the Rose Bowl! We caught up with Coach Coker in Pasadena California to talk about what it means to be only the 2nd ever rookie-head coach in college football to go all the way!

This style is known as the *inverted pyramid* because it turns the traditional pyramid style around, allowing readers to stop at any time and still get the most important parts of the feature.

From Jakob Nielsen's Alertbox Article for June 1996: *Inverted Pyramids in Cyberspace*
Writing to Be Read

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.

From *Writing for the Web* by Jakob Nielsen, republished at http://www.sun.com/980713/webwriting/
Writing to Be Read

Hyperlinks:

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.

Don’t write out URLs. Use text links and with more discretion image links (ADA).

Use a description of the information to be found in the link.

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.

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Writing to Be Read

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 the 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.

From *Writing for the Web* by Jakob Nielsen, republished at http://www.sun.com/980713/webwriting/
Writing to Be Read
Poor Example!

Welcome to the IT Department and Division of Enrollment’s Content Creation Website. We have gathered a bunch of links and other informational sources to help you learn virtually all there is to know about writing content for the use on the Internet. Our office has culled research from such sources as ClickZ.com, Arttoday.com, About.com and www.useit.com and cited where necessary in order to provide you with the most up-to-date information on content creation. Other websites published by our Division include sites for the Offices of the Registrar, OFAS and of course, Enrollments.
Writing Web Content Workshops

See our Workshop RSVP Form to sign up!

Are students constantly calling and asking about programs and resource information that is posted on the web? Do you find yourself explaining the same things over and over to new staff members who didn't understand your department's internal training site?

This workshop will quickly bring you up to speed on:

- How web users read content on a screen
- The differences between print and online communication
- How to write so that users can quickly grasp what you've written online
- How to effectively proofread text written for the Internet
- Sources of additional information from content-writing experts
10 tips for Proofreading Online writing

1. Minimize distractions and interruptions. It's easy to lose your place and skip over text when you're interrupted or distracted. Turn off your phone. Close email. Shut yourself in a quiet room.

2. Don't be the sole proofreader of your own writing. You're too close to it; you can't see mistakes others see.

3. Force yourself to slow down and concentrate. Focus on each word and character -- letters, punctuation, special characters, spaces -- not on meaning. If you think about meaning, you'll see what you expect to see, especially in your own writing. Break large slabs of copy into small bits to avoid slipping into automatic reading mode.

Continued on next slide

Taken from ClickZ.com article: Online Copywriting & Editing by Kathy Henning ( 3-6-2001)
10 tips for Proofreading Online writing

4. Don't try to find every mistake in one pass. Read through the material several times, looking for different problems each time, such as:

- Inconsistencies
- Ambiguity
- Factual errors
- Missing words
- Typos and misspellings
- Easily confused words (e.g., "to" for "too" and "your" for "you're")
- Formatting problems

5. Proofread online on different platforms and in different browsers. Check the text on a Mac and PC, in Internet Explorer and Netscape. If your audience comprises a substantial percentage of AOL users (more than five percent), check the text in AOL, too.

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6. Print out the pages for one final read-through. Proofreading on screen and proofreading on paper complement each other well. It's easier to catch some errors on paper and others on screen.

7. Read backwards. Reading backwards can help you focus on the words and not get distracted by meaning. But don't depend on it too much; it doesn't expose things like incorrect homonyms and confusing word order.

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8. Proof any text in all caps separately and more painstakingly. Typos and misspellings are much more difficult to see in all caps.

9. If there's an outline or table of contents, check it separately. Otherwise you'll get caught up in the text and miss errors.

10. Proof the most prominent text separately. Ironically, the most prominent text is often the most easily overlooked.

Taken from ClickZ.com article: Online Copywriting & Editing by Kathy Henning (3-6-2001)