

Writing for the Web: Beat by Beat

Writing for the web is very different from writing for other formats. Readers online are much less willing to trudge through lots of content, dense text, or heavy use of sales “fluffery.”

With this short training, you’ll learn the basics of writing for the web; from front-loading content, to clear design techniques, and finishing with proper tone and best practices for the future — all will be covered, as we get deeper into this important writing technique.

Hit Me With Your Best Shot

First things first; get the info the reader needs out there right away. Burying your information later in the article won’t make your user read more, it will cause them to leave and search elsewhere. Keep in mind these handy tips for putting your best foot forward.

Front-Load the facts

Readers read about 20% of a page’s content. They scan and search for what they need, so if they don’t find it right away, they won’t continue reading.

Cut. It. Out.

Make your content concise and to-the-point. Filling it with flowery prose to enhance an article often strains a user’s patience. They are looking for the answer to a question. Answer it for them as quickly as you can, or some other site will.

Simple Text for the Soul

Your readers aren’t dumb, but playing up the jargon for the sake of sounding more intelligent doesn’t help

convey the subject better, either. It can actually help lose the reader’s attention. Keep things short and to the point. Reasonably short sentences and shorter paragraphs. Both options facilitate better scanning and readability for the user. According to usability.gov, sentences are ideally less than 20 words and paragraphs are less than five sentences.

U Got the Look

Design plays a huge role in terms of readability and scanability. It can be tough to abandon the notion of the rank-and-file five-paragraph story, but so often users are looking to dispense with formality in order to find the information they are looking for.

For starters, make use of a proper hierarchy of content. Use headers, sub-headers, and even sub-sub-headers to provide a path to what they want. Think of these as road signs on the way to what they are looking for.

Have you ever been to IKEA? You know how you essentially have to walk in one path through the whole store? This is the way novels are written: a progression of ideas that build on one another to form one coherent, long-form thought or impression. Writing for the web doesn’t work that way. It’s more like a mall. You hit up the directory (Google) and head to where you need to go. Once you’re at the right store (that’s your article), you’ve got to provide the right directions so people can find what they need quickly and easily. Headers are like the signs hanging above different departments.



Bullets with Butterfly Wings

One of the bread-and-butter techniques for making things easy to spot is making use of the bulleted list. This allows your user to flutter past other content and get right to what they are looking for. Use these whenever you have a series of items in order to help the reader separate them out from the rest of your content.

If you like it, then you should have put a on it

Sometimes a lengthy paragraph can't be helped. You can still provide scanability posts along the way, though. If things need emphasis, consider bolding them to help call them out. Use this carefully, however. Highlighting a whole page isn't effective at all.

Look at this Photograph

The most common way to break up text is by using an image to balance an article visually. This is fine, as long as the image is related and meaningful to the article or content. Don't add a stock image just because you feel like you want an image on the page. That's just distracting. If the image is contextual, then by all means include it.

Tone it, Tone it, Tone it

You have to remember why you're writing the article and for whom. Part of being a content expert is knowing who the reader is. What are they like? Tailor your content to the tone of your user. Use industry jargon geared toward them. This will help with their understanding and has the added benefit of being good for SEO.

While we're on the topic of jargon, there are other types to avoid, namely sales jargon and hyperbole. You need to sound knowledgeable and genuine. Again, your users aren't dumb. They will see right through a sales pitch. Appearing as an expert and supporting that with facts shows them the better sales pitch.

A casual tone, supported by fact, is a great motivator for readers to subscribe to your content. Cite sources when possible. Provide links to those sources. Make sure they are reputable sources. Each of these skills can be used to improve your overall tone, reputation, and searchability.

Keep it (so) Fresh, and (so) Clean

You need be sure that what your content says is still accurate at all times. Be mindful that articles on the web have a reasonably short shelf life. The web is ever-changing and you need to be sure your content changes with it.

The Times They Are A-Changin'

If you have the option to timestamp your article, do so. Letting the user know how old the content is (or isn't) is helpful for them to put it in context. The challenge to you, then, is to ensure that your content is always fresh. Keep it up to date and change content as facts or concepts evolve over time.

Clear out and set expiration dates for articles. If you're putting out content regularly, you should be mindful that the older content might be out of date. A good tip is to find your oldest article and review it each time you publish a new article.

Bring Out Your Dead

Reviewing old content has another added benefit: it's the perfect chance to ensure that you are still linking to content properly. Linking to pages that are no longer active or to broken links is a great way to hurt your SEO and harm your reputation as a content creator. When reviewing old content:

- Check for and update dead/outdated links
- Update content that needs to change
- Check the overall tone and ensure it's still using the right voice



Technologic

Some technical details that help with writing for the web:

- Well-written text is essentially SEO optimized already.
- Link well — use targeted and reputable sources to support your content. Your search rank will thank you.
- Targeted industry jargon helps you stand out among the similar content readers are looking for. Buzz words are a way to get buried among the masses.

