

Writing for the Web

Nature of the web

Text on a screen is hard to read as the definition is comparatively poor and it takes around 25% longer to read text on screen than on paper. This makes people impatient and if something doesn't seem worth reading, they will abandon your site pretty quickly.

Nature of the web user

People on the web jump around a lot. They are constantly deciding if it is worth reading on or jumping to another part of the page. They may leap to another part of your site or to another web site entirely.

You have between 5 and 10 seconds to grab their attention and convince them you have something worthwhile to offer them. Sections of text need to make sense in isolation and the content must be appealing, simple and convincing.

People tend to scan text on the screen, picking out particular words and sentences. Some people just scan the hyperlinks on the page. Most people will scroll down a page - but only a little bit so it's good to keep pages fairly short.

Preparing your text - some ideas to consider

1. Say what you have to say quickly. Keep content to between 30 and 700 words per page.
2. Write objective content and not hype. People are in a hurry and they want simple facts so they can make their own decisions. Hype is harder to read as the person exerts critical judgement as they read – Is this true? Can I believe this? Any doubt and they will go somewhere else.
3. Use lots of headings and sub-headings as these act as signposts. They show the reader where they are and what to expect next. The viewer should always be able to see at least one heading on the screen. The headings should be specific, meaningful, tantalising and summarise what is to come e.g. rather than having “Company History”, how about “The power behind two generations” – if you were and electricity company.
4. Write hyperlink text that sends a message or acts like a heading.
5. Highlight significant sentences or phrases in a different colour or bold.

6. Use bullet points sparingly. Keep them short and snappy (people don't read long bullet point lists) and make sure they make sense in their own right.
7. People often scan by reading the first few words of each paragraph only – so use it to your advantage. Each chunk of text needs to make sense in isolation. Structure each paragraph to include a single idea only. Put your main point first with subsequent detail after. Limit your paragraph length to a maximum of 65 words.
8. Make sure you use plain language.
 - Use short simple sentences of between 15 and 20 words.
 - Use simple, commonly known words
 - Use 'you' and we like you're in a conversation
 - Use paragraphs and whole sentences to describe things
 - Use pro-active and positive language
9. Some search engines will use your text content and paragraph titles to index and prioritise your site. So to improve your search engine listing consider the following:
 - Write between 300 and 850 words per page.
 - Ensure the first 20 words of the page make sense and really sell you. Lycos uses the first 20 words as a description in search results.
 - For Alta Vista, include your main keywords in the first paragraph of the page.
 - For Lycos, include keywords in text headings and subheadings.
 - Use and repeat keywords and key phrases of 2 to 3 words. Aim for 5 to 6 repeats of keywords or a frequency of 1-2% (of the total words on the page).
 - Use keywords in hyperlinks.
 - Don't put prices on the home page
10. Tell the viewer how the features of your product or service will benefit them.
 - A FEATURE is one of the components or functions of your product or service. For example, if your waterproof gear has glow-in-the-dark strips, that's a feature -- not a benefit.
 - A BENEFIT is something your product or service will do for your buyer to somehow offer a solution to a problem. So if your waterproof gear with glow-in-the-dark strips means that the cost of work place accidents will be reduced, then you've got yourself a benefit!

Emphasising benefits is the **number one most overlooked rule** of web site writing, and this lack of emphasis is one of the top reasons advertising falls flat.

11. The fact is, your product or service is just not going to appeal to everyone. And if you try to market it to everyone, you'll wind up with far fewer sales than if you choose a select group to direct your copy to.

So once you've defined your target market, you need to turn your attention toward making sure your copy addresses them directly.

You need to think about what is going to grab their **ATTENTION**. What information is going to really be of **INTEREST** to them? And what can you say that is guaranteed to stimulate a **DESIRE** so strong, they just have to take the **ACTION** you suggest?

12. Call people to action. Suggest or recommend they do something as a result of what they have read e.g. "Click here to register", "Contact us at ...for more information", "The newsletter is updated each month so bookmark this page and we will see you again next month".

13. Build credibility and trust by including

- Plenty of useful, well written and relevant content
- Secure order and payment forms and make sure the viewer knows they are secure
- No spelling mistakes
- Give them free stuff
- Your company name and contact details on all pages
- A money back guarantee or terms where appropriate
- Testimonials from people with real names and their company
- A promise to keep customer details confidential
- A real sense of you, your team, your company with information, credentials and photos – make them feel confident you exist!
- Links to other websites that are relevant, useful and have been vetted by you as quality sites
- Regular updates providing fresh information to encourage repeat visits

Reference

Rachel McAlpine, "Web Word Wizardry" Corporate Communications 1999.