

writing for the web

reading the web

People use the Internet to get a wealth of information in a short amount of time. Several studies have shown that almost 80% of users scan content instead of reading it verbatim. They're accustomed to browsing data from the top-down as opposed to the traditional left to right reading of print. They also want to be able to scan several topics at once without having to wade through pages of laborious text.

You can double the usability of your web site by following these guidelines: for two sample sites studied in Sun's Science Office, we improved measured usability by 159% and 124% by rewriting the content according to the guidelines.

Writing for the Web is very different from writing for print:

- 79% of users scan the page instead of reading word-for-word
- Reading from computer screens is 25% slower than from paper
- Web content should have 50% of the word count of its paper equivalent

writing for the web

Effective web writing means tailoring segments of your site to a specific audience. Prospective students, alumni, faculty and staff should be able to scan and readily access content relevant to each of them.

Simple and Scannable: The best way to connect with your readers is to speak to them in a language they understand. It's easier to absorb clear, concise information in a small window of time than a laundry list of technical terms and subjects.

For example:

Mary had a little lamb.

NOT

Mary was the possessor of a ruminant quadruped.

Examine your content from an off-campus audience or prospective student's point of view. They may not know that a "residence hall" is a dorm or that "FAFSA" is related to financial aid. You can introduce these terms if they are followed with an explanation or definition. Otherwise, avoid the casual use of "academia speak."

List of commonly used “Academia-Speak”:

- bursar
- commencement
- distance learning
- intersession
- matriculation
- residence halls
- tuition versus fees
- undergraduate versus graduate

Also acronyms:

- 4+4
- FAFSA
- HSC
- RA

Familiarity and Structure. A comfortable reader is an attentive reader. Organize your content by importance - the heart of the info first, followed by a brief explanation and details (“inverted pyramid” style). Also, write and proofread aloud as if you were holding a casual conversation. A writer’s voice lets an audience know that you’re writing for them, not at them. This rapport makes them more receptive to your ideas.

Short Paragraphs. Most readers scan only the first sentence of each paragraph. Make your point in the first sentence and build around a single idea.

Credibility. It’s important to update facts and provide fresh content to keep users coming back.

readability

Minimize word count with headings, lists, and short paragraphs.

Headings. Help readers find specific information by topic. Headings should be kept short (typically 4-8 words) and include keywords from corresponding paragraphs.

You can use questions as headings if the question is answered in the first paragraph and the paragraph text can stand alone.

For example:

Question: When is the deadline to apply for summer financial aid?

Answer: The deadline to apply for summer financial aid is April 1, 2008.

NOT

Question: When is the deadline to apply for summer financial aid?

Answer: April 1, 2008

Example of effective headlines and teasers from the OU homepage:

OU Student Named 2008 American Rhodes Scholar

University of Oklahoma senior Andrea M. DenHoed was named a 2008 American Rhodes Scholarship recipient, becoming OU's 27th Rhodes Scholar. DenHoed, a letters and international studies major from Aurora, Colorado, plans to pursue a B.A. in English language and literature at Oxford. Read more about Andrea M. DenHoed.

Boomer and Sooner Ponies Retired

The brief retirement ceremony that took place before Saturday's game against Oklahoma State marked the official end of the fourth Boomer and Sooner team to pull the Sooner Schooner. Read more about Ponies Retired.

Most search engines use the text within header tags (e.g. H1, H2, etc.) to rank web pages. That's why it is vital to include keywords in your headings and sub-headings. "Search engines assume that anything important enough to put in larger text is also relevant to the page's content" (http://www.netmechanic.com/news/vol4/html_no9.htm). So, if you wanted to search for information about "OU" and "Rhodes Scholars", you could easily find "OU Student Named 2008 American Rhodes Scholar" among the top pages for those keywords.

Also, *Read more about Ponies Retired.* is easier to scan than just *Read more.* Links should be topic oriented and make sense if they stand alone.

Lists. Avoid long sentences and superfluous punctuation by arranging ideas in a list.

- Introduce all lists by at least one line of text.
- Use numbered lists if content is sequential.
- Use bullet points only if sequence isn't important.
- Limit the number of items in the list to a maximum of nine.
- Keep the amount of text in each line short.
- Limit lists to two levels, primary and secondary.

Hyperlinks. Hyperlinks are visually appealing because of their color. Use them as keywords whenever possible.

Only link the first instance of a word or phrase on the same page.

For example:

Visit [financial aid services](#) for more information about scholarships and financial aid opportunities at The University of Oklahoma.

When users scan pages, [example.ou.edu](#) looks considerably different than <http://www.example.ou.edu>. It's important to be consistent and write simple URLs that readers can scan.

Intuitive links get more attention.

For example:

[Click here for financial aid information](#)

is easier to scan than

[Click here](#) for financial aid information

Broken URLs are eyesores. If you must break a URL across a line, do so after a slash.

Bold Text and Capital Letters. Bold text is a great way to highlight keywords but should be used sparingly. Too much bold text or all CAPS is hard to read. Limit bold to signify important information - while leaving the message itself uncolored.

Captions. Captions are great ways to identify illustrations, charts, and pictures. You can prevent redundant information, like identical captions and headings, by making them unique or omitting them if the context is clear.

navigation

Summarize important information on primary pages and move detailed content to secondary pages. This makes it easier for users can scan what they need and click through to secondary pages to read more about it.

references

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