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Writing for a Web audience

Ten Web writing tips to gain your Web visitors' trust and keep them coming back for more

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Studies show Web visitors don't read; they skip and scan. Will your Web site accommodate them? Also, solid, well-written, grammatically correct Web content is crucial to gaining the user's trust. Following are 10 tips to help you write for the Web in a way that gains the trust of your readers and supports their style of Web browsing.

In May 2000, Stanford University and The Poynter Institute released the findings from their joint study on how people read news on the Web. By tracking eye movements, researchers determined that on their initial visit to a page, people paid more attention to text than to graphics. Within the text, they first scanned (in no particular order) for headlines, article summaries, and captions.

Most readers (nearly 80% in the Stanford-Poynter study) read article summaries rather than complete articles. When reading complete articles, most scanned -- reading only about 75% of the text. At the same time Web visitors are scanning your Web page, they may also be skipping over to your competition. Readers in the Stanford-Poynter study kept multiple browsers open, switching among multiple Web sites.

While the Stanford-Poynter study focused on reading news on the Web, the results were similar to various studies conducted by Jakob Nielsen, Jarod Spool, and others in the mid-1990's. These studies resulted in the following key findings:

- Most readers scan.
- Screen reading is significantly slower than reading print.
- Readers understand more when reading less (50% fewer words work best when rewriting formal papers into Web pages).

The [Resources](#) list at the end of this article provides links to some of these studies.

Scanning and skipping and trust -- Oh my!

To write well for the Web, we must adjust our writing to help readers who scan the page and skip back and forth among multiple sites.

But there's more to it than that. In a survey about trust and the Web, John Rhodes found that solid, well-written, grammatically correct content is crucial to gaining the user's trust. He also found that freshness and frequent updates are critical factors.

Here are 10 Web-writing tips designed to gain the trust of your readers and to help them scan and skip to their hearts' desire.

Punch up headlines

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Web visitors scan first for headlines, so you should make every heading word meaningful. The Web is not the place for funny, cute, or silly headlines.

Format the first heading as an HTML <H1>, and make sure it clearly summarizes the page. It's what users will read first to learn if they want to read further on the page.

Clarify the content of each section with section headings, formatted as <H2>s in HTML.

While you may need to break up sections into sub-sections (with corresponding meaningful <H3> headings), I wouldn't recommend nesting headings any deeper than that. Deeply nested headings require that the user work hard to decipher organizational meaning. Instead, break up a complex Web page into multiple related pages -- one for each primary topic.

Emphasize key concepts

Help your readers scan for key concepts by emphasizing important information.

You can emphasize by using **bold** or **colored text**, or by highlighting the text with a different background color. But don't use italics for emphasis because *italics are difficult to read* on a computer monitor. There are just not enough pixels to render italics clearly.

Make sure that emphasized keywords are visually distinct from hypertext links. If you use the standard underlined blue for unvisited links and purple for visited links, use a different color and style for emphasized keywords.

Harness the power of lists

Lists are great for scanning. They slow the reader down and bring attention to important information. Use bullet points when the sequence of information doesn't matter. Use numbered points when it does. But don't make the mistake of writing full sentences and paragraphs in each list point. The whole idea of lists is to make it easy to pull out key concepts. Here are some examples.

Facts about lists:

- Easy to scan
- Slow the reader down
- Emphasize important information

To create a numbered list in HTML, type:

1. to start the numbered list
2. to start the first list item
3. Information for the first list item
4. to end the first list item
5. Repeat steps 2 - 5 for each additional list item
6. to end the numbered list

Create meaningful captions

Because Web users focus on text over graphics, make sure to caption all graphics clearly.

When readers scan for information, they first see the Web page's headings, bold text, and captions. So give them the most information you can by making sure each caption reveals information that's not spelled out in headings or otherwise emphasized.

A meaningful caption also helps visually impaired readers gain understanding, even when they cannot see the associated graphic.

Simplify for understanding

Reading from the screen is slower than reading from print, so make your users happy by giving them less to read.

Use fewer words, smaller words, and simpler words, and place those words into simple sentence structures. When

you're done writing, wield a sharp editor's knife on your words to reduce every sentence to its essence.

Utilize=use. Construct=build. Create your own list of word substitutions to simplify your writing.

Puns and metaphors serve to confuse. Puns are difficult for international users to understand, so avoid them. Likewise, avoid metaphors, which too many people will take literally.

Invert the pyramid

The inverted pyramid style is bottom-up. To write this way, start by stating the conclusion. Then build upon the conclusion by summarizing the most interesting and important supportive information. Next provide detail about each important point. Then close with background information.

This style of writing fits well with the needs of people who scan. They can get the key points quickly, and continue reading for detail only if interested.

Organizing information from most important to least important works well for users who scroll more now than in the past, but still react most strongly to that which is visible. In printed newspapers, the most important information is placed above the fold. Likewise, you should place the most important online information above the scroll line to make sure it gets read.

Write one idea per paragraph

Make sure each paragraph contains one idea only, and summarize that idea in the first sentence. The Stanford-Poynter study found that people who scan read the first sentence or two of each paragraph and thus may miss any additional points made further into the paragraph.

Make each page stand alone

Don't expect that users will enter your Web site at the home page and work their way through the site in an organized manner. Thanks to the power of search engines and offsite links, visitors may enter your site on any page at all. Because of this, each page needs to stand alone, and your prose must not assume that they have already read any other page. Provide context to help users understand where the page fits within your Web site.

Breadcrumb links are an excellent way to place each page in context within the hierarchy of the Web site. These are a horizontal series of text links connecting to all parent levels of the hierarchy above the current location.

Keeping each page independent will also help visitors who, like the readers in the Stanford-Poynter study, keep multiple browsers open to jump among Web pages on multiple sites. With all that activity, they're clearly not reading your pages in sequence.

To reduce the need to scroll, it makes sense to split long documents into multiple pages. But do so in a way that each page can stand on its own. It should cover a single sub -topic thoroughly, and it should provide context to place the page within the longer document.

Wendy Peck places a page about Fireworks Typography in context within a multipage article about using typography in graphics design (see [Figure 1](#)). She provides clearly labeled hypertext links to each of the other sub-topics, and includes navigation buttons that show at a glance the number of pages in the article and the location of the current page within the article.

Figure 1. The *Fireworks Typography* topic appears in context within a multipage article map

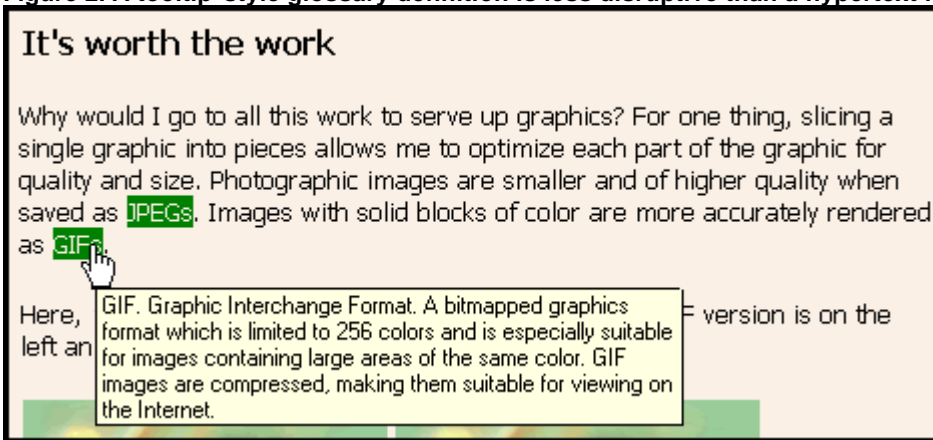


Link wisely

Links can help reduce clutter by moving definitions and background information to separate Web pages. But when concentrating on content, people often ignore embedded links. They don't want to be interrupted by having to wait for another page to load.

You can solve this problem by putting explanatory text into a sidebar in the left- or right-hand margin on the same Web page, or create mouseover tooltip-style text for glossary items (see [Figure 2](#)). These techniques allow users to stay on the same page when reviewing definitions for unfamiliar acronyms.

Figure 2. A tooltip-style glossary definition is less disruptive than a hypertext link



The HTML code for the mouseover tooltip shown in Figure 2, which works for Microsoft Internet Explorer (version 4.0 and greater), is as follows:

```
<a style="cursor: hand" title="glossary definition">word</a>.
```

To implement it in Netscape (at least through version 4.7) you would need to write some code using JavaScript.

If your Web page includes links to a number of cross-referenced documents, move the links to a sidebar in the margin. That may free up space to include a title and some explanatory text for each cross-referenced document.

When you embed links within your writing, don't reference the link itself. You'll interrupt the reader's concentration by commenting on the link with phrases such as "Click here and follow this link."

Be current, accurate, and credible

Capture the trust of your readers by offering information that is up-to-date and accurate.

Test for dead links frequently. If a link doesn't work, it's certain to irritate. Unless you know it's only temporary, remove it.

Make sure your facts are correct. A new year often brings new statistics. If you quote statistics, be sure they are current and accurate.

A simple way to improve credibility: Skip the marketing hype. Replace it with well-written, interesting, and useful information.

Give credit where credit is due. If your site has multiple authors, give each one credit with a byline. Bylines are personal touches that add credibility to a Web site. And don't just quote information from a study or survey; you'll gain credibility by providing a direct link to the source.

If you follow these Web-writing tips, you'll gain Web site visitors' trust and keep them coming back for more.

Resources

- [Stanford-Poynter Project Eyetracking Study](#). In this study by Marion Lewenstein, Greg Edwards, Deborah Tatar, Andrew DeVigal (2000), 67 test subjects read online news sites as they normally would, while their eye movements were tracked and recorded into a database. A key finding in this study: Online news readers tend to look at text and spend virtually no time looking at graphics -- even when those graphics are photographs that augment and enhance the textual information provided on the Web page.
- [Survey: What makes users trust a Web site](#). In this survey by John Rhodes (1998), some respondents claimed they would never trust any Web site. Three primary trust factors surfaced: good content, simple design, and few grammatical errors.
- [User Interface Engineering Scrolling Study](#). Users say they don't like to scroll, but this 1998 study by Jarod Spool found they are willing to scroll as long as the page gives them strong clues that scrolling will help them find what they're looking for.
- [Applying Writing Guidelines to Web Pages](#). Research conducted by John Morkes and Jakob Nielsen in 1998 showed that Web users generally prefer writing that is concise, easy to scan, and objective (rather than promotional) in style. Incorporating these and other attributes into a redesign of Web content required trade-offs and some hard decisions, but the results were positive. The rewritten Web site scored 159% higher than the original in measured usability. Compared with original-site users, users of the rewritten site reported higher subjective satisfaction and performed better in terms of task time, task errors, and memory.
- [Concise, SCANNABLE, and Objective: How to Write for the Web](#). When John Morkes and Jakob Nielsen conducted studies in 1997 to determine how users read on the Web, they found that users do not actually read -- instead, they scan the text. A study of five different writing styles found that a sample Web site scored 58% higher in measured usability when it was written concisely, 47% higher when the text was scannable, and 27% higher when it was written in an objective style instead of the promotional style used in the control condition and many current Web pages. Combining these three changes into a single site that was concise, scannable, and objective at the same time resulted in 124% higher measured usability.
- IBM's [IBM's Ease of Use site](#) offers [Web Design Guidelines](#) that can help your site retain visitors and attract new ones.
- IBM offers training courses in user-centered design -- find out more [here](#).

About the author



Constance Petersen is co-founder of SoftMedia Artisans, Inc. (www.smartisans.com), a company that helps its clients create useful, usable software and Web sites. A frequent writer on Web usability topics, Petersen is currently collaborating with her business partner (a.k.a. husband) and their son on a Web development book, *Visual Basic.NET Internet Black Book*. You can reach her at constance@smartisans.com.



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- Killer! (5)
- Good stuff (4)
- So-so; not bad (3)
- Needs work (2)
- Lame! (1)

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