



DM Best Practices

Writing for the Web

Effective web writing involves the having the proper content, written in the right style and formatted for effective scanning. This best practices paper will discuss ways to achieve this balance and includes useful tips for

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Why good web writing matters

People read differently on the web

For years, usability researchers have found that web users *scan*, word for word.

- *skim* pages
- Pick out *key words* and phrases
- Read in *snippets*, short bursts
- Are *task* oriented
- Click and forage in search of *information* that lead them

There is evidence, in fact, that shows that reading on a screen is physiologically more difficult than reading on paper. Reading long paragraphs on a screen hurts the eyes, is laborious and time consuming in a medium known for speed.

Users

However, even though users will read more when the information provides extended information on their topic of interest, good web writing practices should still be employed. It is also important to note that

Effective web writing involves the having the proper content, written in the right style and formatted for effective scanning. The following pages will discuss ways to achieve this balance.

The contents of your content

The web is no longer just another channel for communications. *It is* your dialog with your customers. Information is on-

Unless the format and integrity of the original printed document must be maintained, such as a printable form or brochure, do not use PDFs for the web. PDF (portable document format by Adobe), Word documents or any other printed document type are not intended for the web and pose issues with search-ability, access and readability. Besides, this paper is all about writing for the web and if the content was written for print your website.

Writing Style

Inverted pyramid style

Traditional academic writing follows a pyramid style – laying a foundation using many sources and supporting research, gradually working up to a logical conclusion. Writing in this style requires your users to do a lot of reading to get to the point. This *is not the way to write for the web*.

Good web writing follows the inverted pyramid style, which is borrowed from journalism. In this style, the most important information comes first, with additional supporting detail to follow. By putting the main idea first, readers can decide if the content is relevant and either read more or move on, avoiding reading paragraphs of information only to find it was not what they were looking for.

Instead of . . .	Use . . .
despite the fact that regardless of the fact that notwithstanding the fact that	
in the event that if it should transpire/happen that under circumstances in which	
on the occasion of in a situation in which under circumstances in which	
as regards in reference to with regard to concerning the matter of where . . . is concerned	
it is crucial that it is necessary that there is a need/necessity for it is important that it is incumbent upon cannot be avoided	
is able to has the opportunity to is in a position to has the capacity for has the ability to	
it is possible that there is a chance that it could happen that the possibility exists for	
prior to in anticipation of subsequent to at the same time as	

Source: University of Wisconsin- Madison Writing Center

Use simple words

People read simpler

words faster.

Instead of . . .	Use . . .
obtain	Get
prior to	Before
purchase	Buy
request	ask for
subsequent	Next
terminate	End
utilize	Use
cognizant	Know
facilitate	Help

Tip: When writing, think about how you might say the same thing to someone on the telephone.

Provide Context

To help readers scan your page, it is important to provide them with cues that a particular section or instruction applies to them. The best way to do this is to
, and

, send the following documentation to
the Student Accounts office:

Use parallel construction

To improve readability, present similar content in parallel constructions

People anticipate patterns when reading and grasp information more quickly when patterns exist.

Switching patterns requires more mental energy.

Parallel

If you [click here](#), [sign in](#) to view your records
 If you [click here](#), complete the [new account request form](#)

Non-parallel

Customers can view their purchasing history with us online. To do so, simply [sign in](#) to our online account system. Customers who have never used the system must complete a [new account request](#) in order to gain access to the system.

Sentence fragments are o.k.

When writing for the web, [click here](#). There is a difference between coherent fragments or phrases and telegraphic writing.

[Click here](#) only makes the sentence more difficult to read and comprehend. Telegraphic writing may be appropriate for navigation, but not in the body of the page.

Fragment:

Free gift with purchase!

Telegraphic writing:

Customer receives free item with purchase of book.

Use longer, more descriptive links

Page descriptions

Every page of your website should have carefully written metadata, most importantly the page title, description and keywords, which are included in the HTML code for each page. The unique title of the page should be descriptive and concise. The description, usually 15-25 words, is often displayed in search results. Titles and descriptions should be brief and very descriptive.

Structured metadata

Your content management system may allow you to structure metadata and control the vocabulary used by your content contributors to ensure consistency across your website. The use of tags, categories and relationships in your CMS is an excellent way to encourage the proper categorization of content and promotes its re-use throughout the website.

Folksonomy

You may even consider a folksonomy associated with your content. By allowing users to tag content themselves, you can avoid the use of vocabulary and structure that is unfamiliar to people outside of your organization. Such a social, collaborative classification system is known as a folksonomy and is popular in current web 2.0 sites such as YouTube and Flickr.

Formatting

Use headlines and headings

The headline at the top of the page should be clear and concise. Headlines and sub-headings within the page break up the content and make it very easy to read.

Headings should provide visual cues

Headlines and section headings should be high contrast and attract the eye, while acting as a bullet-point summary of the page. Create a consistent visual hierarchy with your headlines that will give readers visual cues to the structure of your content by virtue of color, font and size. Well designed websites will use CSS (cascading style sheets) to specify fonts and colors for various headers (e.g. Header1, Header2, etc.) These can be made available to non-technical web editors through the content editor of your CMS.

By simply reading only the headings on the page, one should get a fairly good idea of the content. The reader can then decide to read on or move on.

Headings should be useful

Headings should inform the content that appears below them. Be clear and precise. Cutesy headings do nothing to help your reader.

are most appropriate for user guides, procedures and policies.

Proper writing style can dramatically improve usability

Jakob Nielsen found that creating objective, scan-able and concise content on a site improved usability by 124%. He measured 5 different versions of the same website (same information and navigation, with variations in wording and format) and found the following:

		Usability Improvement
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