WRITING FOR THE WEB

Amanda Crittenden
Writing for the Web

- Background & studies
- Best practices
- Why it’s important
- How to implement these tools
Online readers are different

- Our brains are conditioned to skip around when reading online.
- Online readers have a shortened attention span & reduced comprehension.
Online reading is a visual process

Lecture by Dr. Stanislas Dehaene on “Reading the Brain”
“Your writing – offline or online – is effective when readers take away your message. Writing effectively online doesn't mean that every reader reads every single word that you write. It means they can quickly and efficiently get the information that is most important to them and move on.”

- Dave Copeland
How do we write effectively online?

Users won’t read web content unless the text is clear, the words and sentences are simple, and the information is easy to understand.

- Jakob Nielsen, November 2015
Legibility, Readability, & Comprehension

- **Legible**
  - Contrast, clear font, reasonable size

- **Readable**
  - Simple sentences are easier to parse than complex ones

- **Comprehensible**
  - Use user-centric language
User-centric vs. Maker-centric Language

3 Essential Guidelines to engage users:

- Speak to readers and not at them
- Include relatable words
- Avoid jargon, marketese, & feature-driven language.
  - Focus on benefits instead.
What is ‘Marketese’?

- “Avoid exclamation points. We know Hampshire is awesome! We love it! But exclamation points on websites can make it look unprofessional! Let the content speak for itself.”

- Hampshire College Web Writing Style Guide
Avoid ‘Marketese’

“Promotional language imposes a cognitive burden on users who have to spend resources on filtering out the hyperbole to get at the facts.”

— How Users Read on the Web
Content has to survive a cost–benefit analysis on the part of users:

- Cost: how much hassle and pain do I have to suffer on this website?
- Benefits: What’s in it for me; what will I gain if I read this information?

Jakob Nielsen, November 2015
Keep content as concise as possible

- Get to the point
- Edit out unnecessary information
- Use easy-to-understand language
- Avoid "marketese" (promotional writing), jargon, and acronyms
- Writing online is visual – utilize white space and keep paragraphs short
Brevity

“Be brief. If you say less, people are more likely to make the effort to understand what you do say.”

- Jakob Nielsen
## Promotional Writing vs Concise text

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site Version</th>
<th>Sample Paragraph</th>
<th>Usability Improvement (relative to control condition)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Promotional writing (control condition)</td>
<td>Nebraska is filled with internationally recognized attractions that draw large crowds of people every year, without fail. In 1996, some of the most popular places were Fort Robinson State Park (355,000 visitors), Scotts Bluff National Monument (132,166), Arbor Lodge State Historical Park &amp; Museum (100,000), Carhenge (86,598), Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer (60,002), and Buffalo Bill Ranch State Historical Park (28,446).</td>
<td>0% (by definition)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concise text</td>
<td>In 1996, six of the best-attended attractions in Nebraska were Fort Robinson State Park, Scotts Bluff National Monument, Arbor Lodge State Historical Park &amp; Museum, Carhenge, Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer, and Buffalo Bill Ranch State Historical Park.</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Objective language

facilitated scanning

- Arbor Lodge State Historical Park & Museum (100,000)
- Carhenge (86,598)
- Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer (60,002)
- Buffalo Bill Ranch State Historical Park (28,446).

**Objective language** using neutral rather than subjective, boastful, or exaggerated language (otherwise the same as the control condition)

Nebraska has several attractions. In 1996, some of the most-visited places were Fort Robinson State Park (355,000 visitors), Scotts Bluff National Monument (132,166), Arbor Lodge State Historical Park & Museum (100,000), Carhenge (86,598), Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer (60,002), and Buffalo Bill Ranch State Historical Park (28,446).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Combined version using all three</th>
<th>In 1996, six of the most-visited places in Nebraska were:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Fort Robinson State Park</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
|                                  |   - Scotts Bluff National Monument                       | 124%
Jakob Nielsen’s usability study found that utilizing concise text improved usability by 58%.

Using concise, scannable & objective text improved usability by 124%.
Use bulleted lists to break up content

- Studies confirm that online readers fixate longer on bulleted lists.
- Online readers like white space
Attention increases with more white space
3x attention time

Do I have a UX guideline problem?

Unless you used a UX professional or followed an approved set of UX guidelines, you have a problem. FYI all the template based sites we’ve seen fail to meet basic UX as well.

Can I see the problem on my site?

ClickTale can help show if your hyperlinks are not obvious or consistently present. Heatmaps show many random clicks on “unclickable” items, be suspicious. Individual recordings should demonstrate similar confusion such as scattered clicks and user frustration.

The visitor’s willingness to tolerate a poor UX will vary according to level of motivation factors, but it is possible that a large percentage will exit without a click if they can’t find what they’re looking for. I see it often in my one-on-one user testing. Be mindful we are only touching and hyperlinks represent about 2% of our basic UX guideline requirements.

OK, What should I do?

If you are building a new site,

- Download a set of accepted guidelines and tell your web developers to follow them.
- Contact a UX professional for a quote, statistics show the ROI on usability work is very high.
- Test your site for compliance prior to launch.
- Ensure that the site has proper analytics tools in place at launch to monitor behavior.

For existing sites,
Example: Family Reading Room

Offerings

The Family Reading Room has four desktop computers and two group study rooms, which can be reserved (rooms 3400C and 3400D) for student use. There is a Lactation Room that can accommodate up to four people. It also has child-sized furniture, books, a train set, learning activity toys, a whiteboard, and media for children. Whiteboard dry erase markers can be purchased at the Library Store on Level 2. Additional outlet covers may be requested at the Level 3 service desk, if needed.

The Marriott Library Juvenile Collection is conveniently located just outside of the Family Reading Room. These books may be checked out at the Security Desks on Level 1 and Level 3.

Family/Gender Neutral restrooms with baby changing stations are located on Level 2 next to the Writing Center and Level 5 next to the entrance of the Library Administration Suite.
Offerings

- **Four desktop computers**
- **Lactation Room** that can accommodate up to four people.
- Child-sized furniture, books, a train set, **learning activity toys**, a whiteboard, and media for children. *Whiteboard dry erase markers can be purchased at the Library Store on Level 2.*
- **Juvenile Collection** is located just outside of the Family Reading Room. These books may be checked out at the Security Desks on Level 1 and **Level 3**.
- Family/Gender Neutral restrooms with baby **changing stations** are located on **Level 2** next to the Writing Center and **Level 5** next to the entrance of the Library Administration Suite.
- Additional **outlet covers** may be requested at the **Level 3** service desk, if needed.
- **Two reservable family study rooms** (rooms 3400C and 3400D) that can accommodate up to four people each. These rooms require a reservation and can be reserved at any library service desk. Parents/guardians must have their children present in the Family Reading Room in order to use these study rooms and are responsible for their children’s’ safety and behavior.
- **Apple TV** is provided for your use and enjoyment and is intended to be used through AirPlay or by using your network provider. For technical assistance, please call the Knowledge Commons at 801-581-6273.
Front-load content: Put the most important/newsworthy information in the first sentence or heading of a section.

Since readers scan web pages, picking out individual words and sentences, each sentence should be able to stand alone & provide information.

Remember Writing 101: One paragraph: one idea
Inverted pyramid for content structure

- Most Important/Newsworthy
- Supporting Details
- Related Info
Why?

People relate better to additional information and supporting details when they already know the basics.
Make content scannable

- Web users scan rather than read digital content thoroughly.
- We skim until we find the information we want, searching for keywords and reading in a non-linear fashion.
- Don’t tell users to “use the links to the left”, click here, or Learn more
- Instead use **contextual links** — users prefer 4 to 8-word descriptive links
Make content scannable

- Put the most important information first
- Add supporting details
- End with related information
3-2-1 Formula

- A few **subheadings**: Informative headings break up blocks of text
- A couple **links**: Add additional information for readers who would like to read more in depth
- **Graphical element**: An image, diagram or something that helps readers visually
“Whatever you use, make sure it advances the story: don’t just put a photo in the post for the sake of posting a photo.”

“Best Practices for Writing for Online Readers”

—Dave Copeland
Use headings to break up long content

- Usability studies show that online readers view pages in blocks of content and tend to scan the page in an “F” formation.
- Use informative headings rather than “cute” or “clever” titles.
F-Shaped Pattern for Reading Web Content
Jakob Nielsen
“When we look at a webpage, we tend to see it not as whole, but rather as compartmentalized chunks of information. We tend to read in blocks, going directly to items that seem to match what we’re actively looking for.”

- Jacob Gube
Acronyms

- ARC
- EBM
- MWDL
- ILL
Avoid using acronyms alone

Write out the words and then put the acronym in parentheses

e.g., Search Engine Optimization (SEO)

Even if the acronym is thought to be widely recognized, many users may not be familiar
Write in an active voice

- Begin with the subject, follow with a strong, active verb & follow with the direct object + indirect object (if necessary) and supporting details
- The active voice leads with the most important information
Active voice summary

- Online readers want us to get to the point. The active voice is naturally more urgent & succinct.

- “Avoid adverbs; they’re a telling sign that you chose the wrong verb.”

[Best Practices for Writing for Online Readers](#)
- Dave Copeland
Writing for the Web Summary

1. Keep content as concise as possible.
2. Use headings to break up long content.
3. Make content scannable.
4. Use bulleted lists (and/or accordions) to break up heavy content.
5. Write in an active voice.
Questions/Discussion

Writing for the Web Support Documentation:
lib.utah.edu/ou-support/writing-for-the-web/

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