

## Abstract

Research shows that we use different parts of our brains when reading online than we do reading books, print, or other materials offline. Our brains are conditioned to skip around when reading online, making web content choices crucial. Utilizing a compilation of web and neuroscience research, we present key tips for writing user-friendly content. Learn the differences between traditional, long form writing and content for the web. Plus, discover tips & tools to create better content on an academic site.

## Concise

- Get to the point
- Edit out unnecessary information
- Use easy-to-understand language
- Avoid “marketese” or promotional writing, jargon, & acronyms
- Utilize white space and keep paragraphs short

## Scannable

- Front-load content
- Put the most important/newsworthy information first
  - Add supporting details
  - End with related information

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.

## Contextual Links

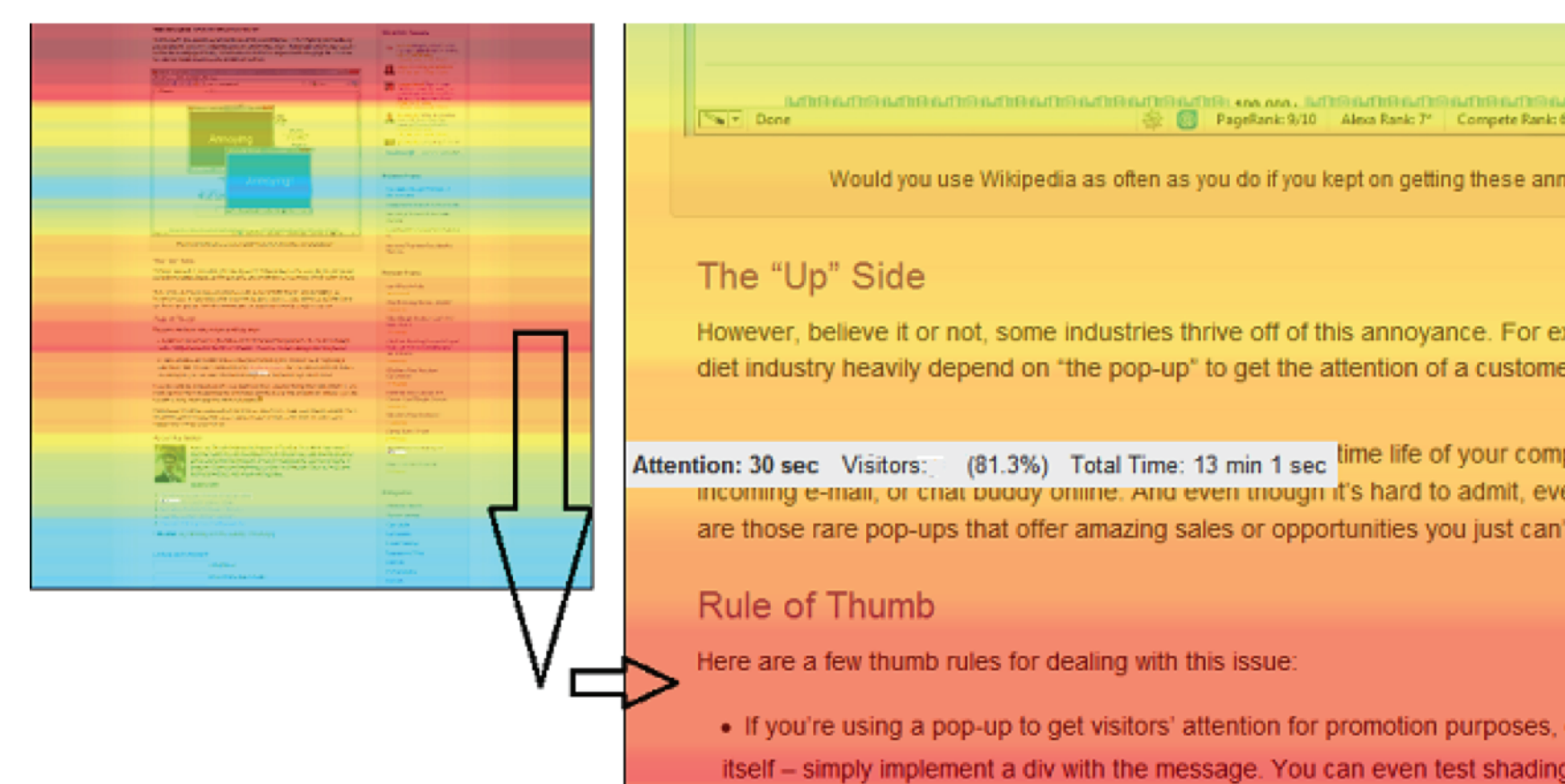
Don't tell users to “use the links to the left”  
Instead, use contextual, descriptive links.

“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.”

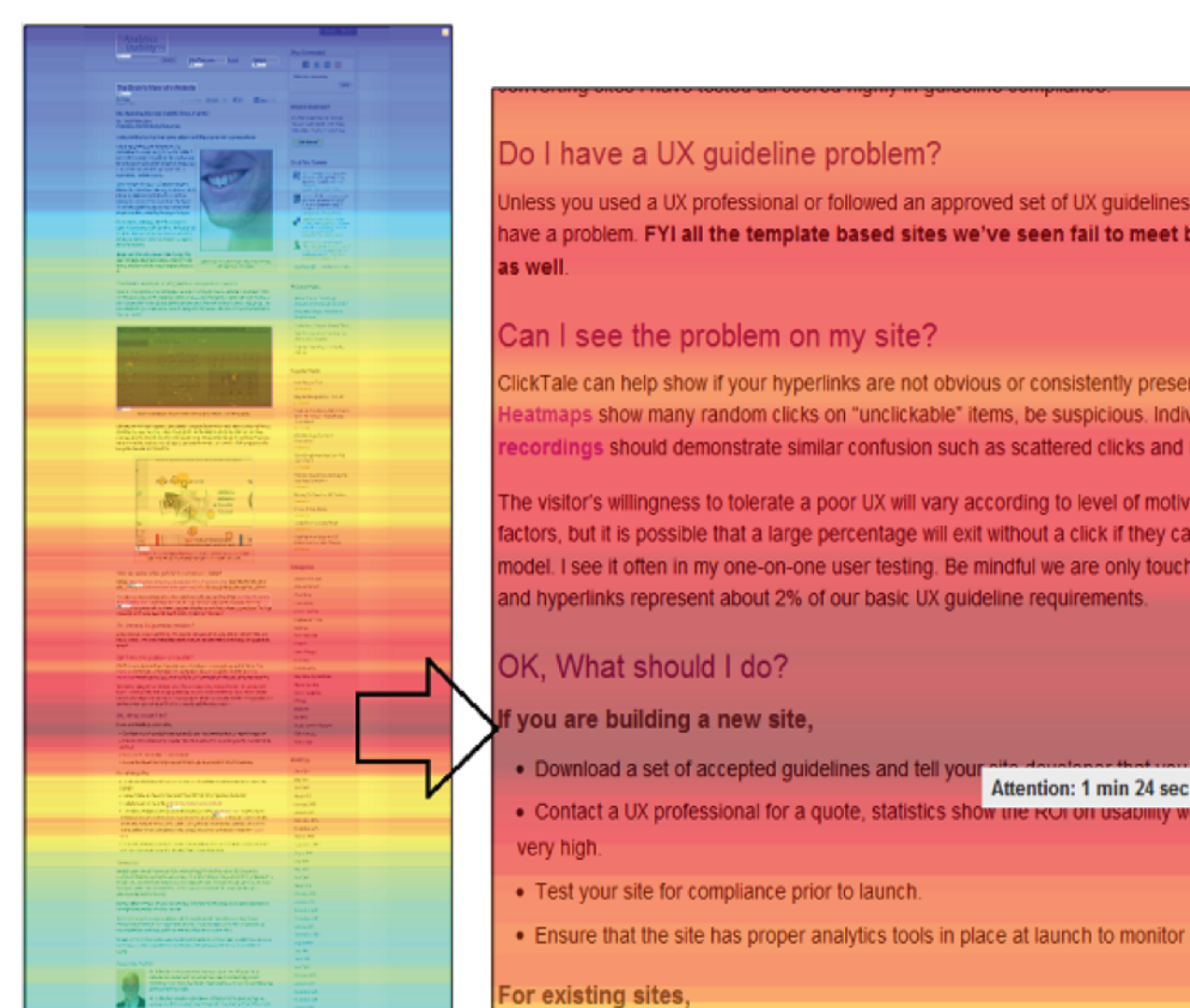
- Dave Copeland

## Bulleted lists help increase white space

Attention increases when there is more white space



3x attention time



# Writing for the Web

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Discovery & Web Services  
University of Utah Marriott Library

**1. Keep content as concise as possible.** Avoid “marketese” or promotional writing, jargon, & acronyms.

**2. 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.

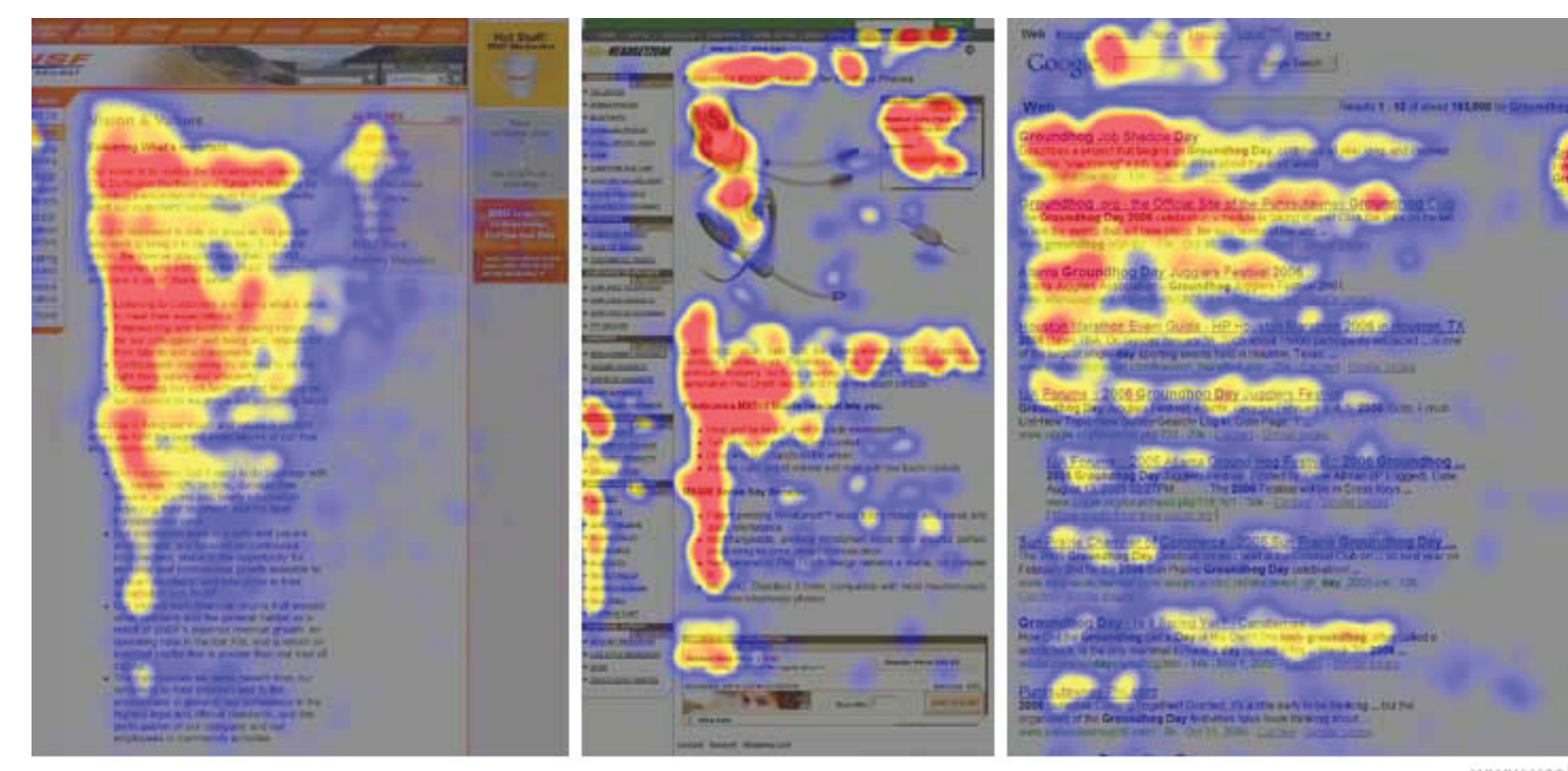
**3. Make content scannable.**

**4. Use bulleted lists to break up heavy content.** Online readers fixate longer on bulleted lists and like white space.

**5. Write in an active voice.**

## Web users tend to read in an F-Shape pattern

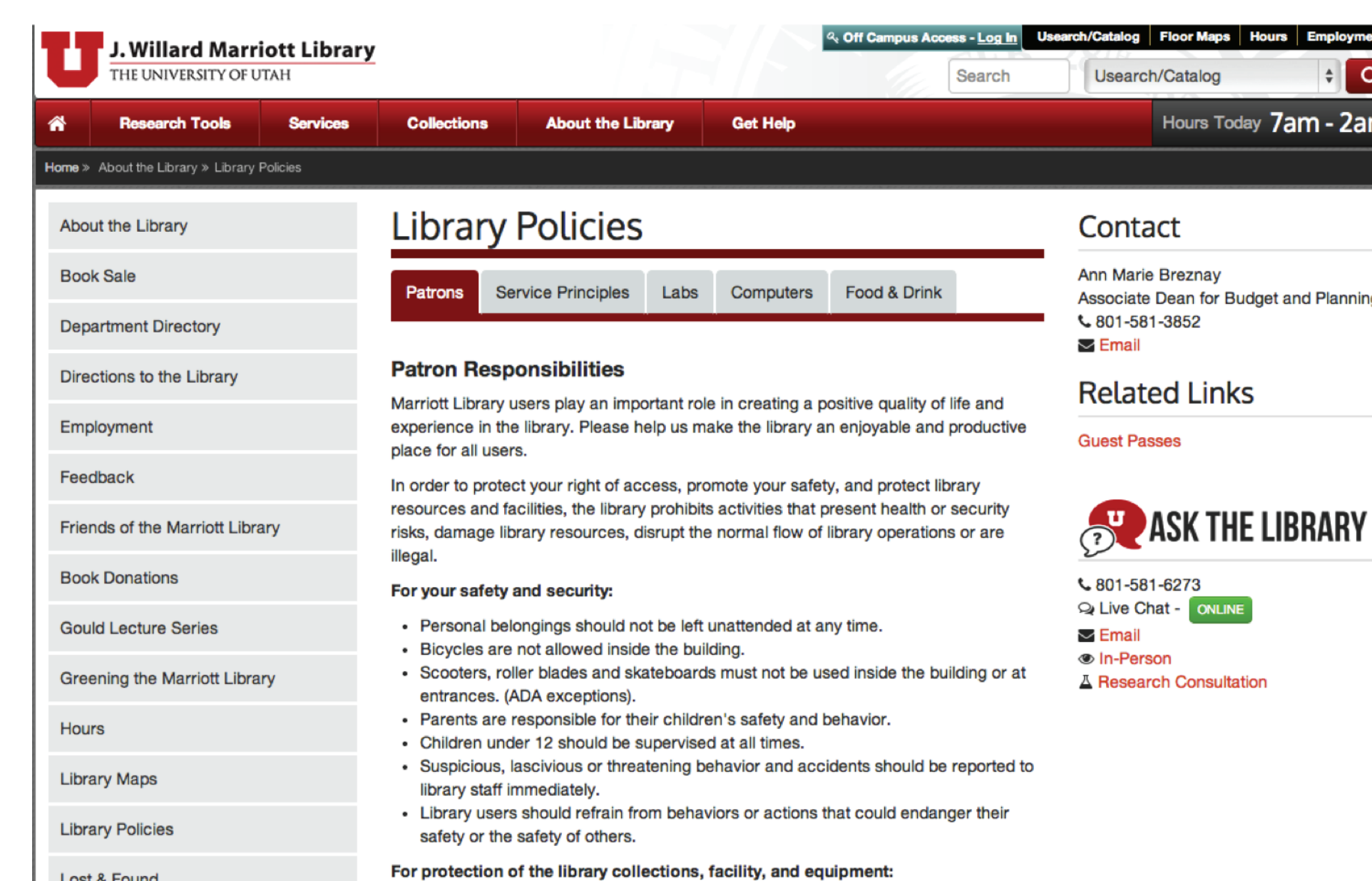
“F for fast. That's how users read your precious content.”  
- Jakob Nielsen



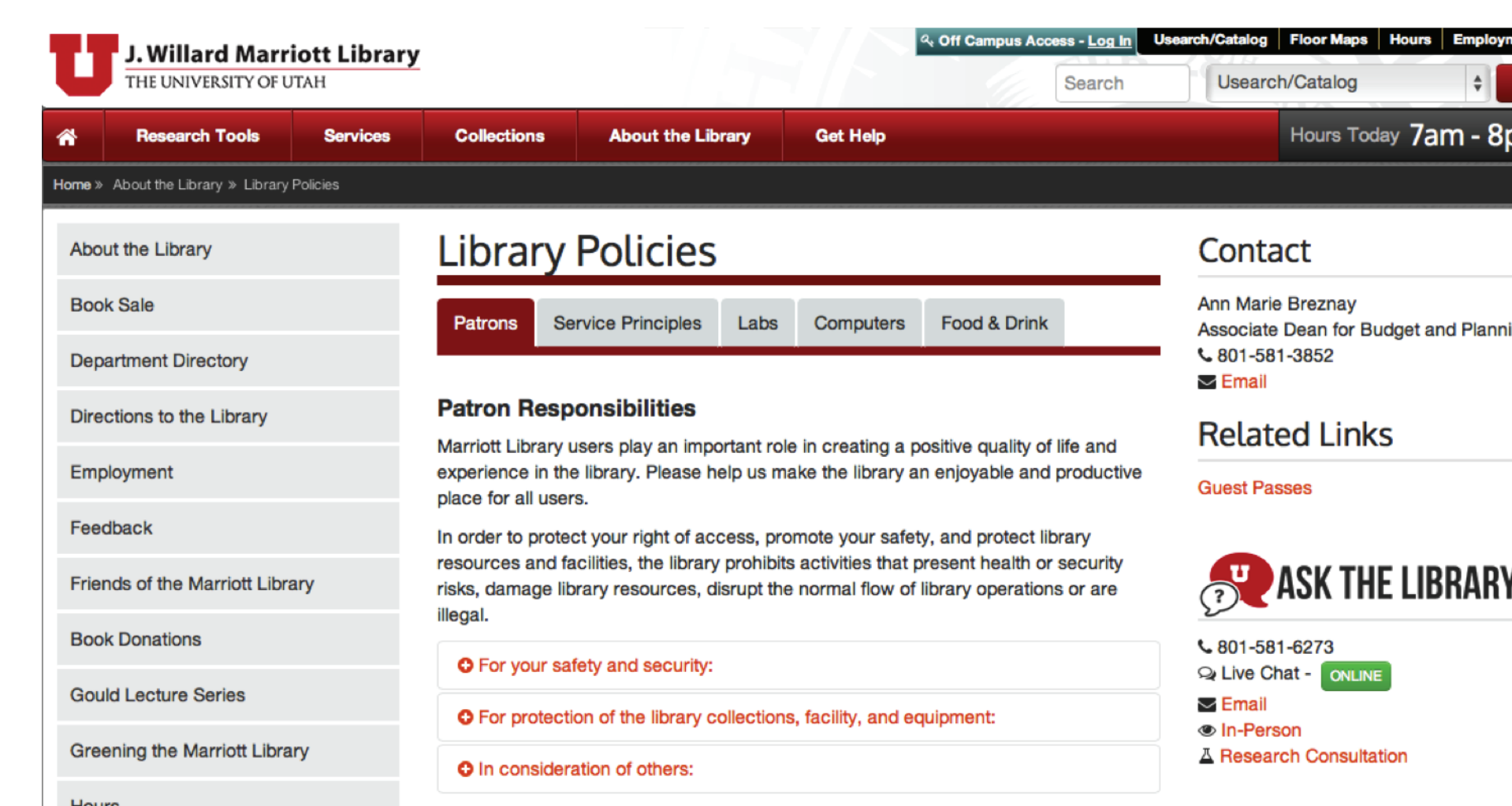
“When we look at a webpage, we tend to see it not as whole, but rather as compartmentalized chunks of information. We tend to read in blocks, going directly to items that seem to match what we're actively looking for.”  
- Jacob Gube

## Utilizing white space with accordions

Before



After



## A note on acronyms

- Avoid using acronyms alone
- Write out the words and then mark the acronym in parentheses  
Search Engine Optimization (SEO)

## How Users Read on the Web

by Jakob Nielsen

Site Version	Sample Paragraph	Usability Improvement (relative to control condition)
<b>Promotional writing (control condition)</b> using the “marketese” found on many commercial websites	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 & Museum (100,000), Carhenge (86,598), Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer (60,002), and Buffalo Bill Ranch State Historical Park (28,446).	0% (by definition)
<b>Concise text</b> with about half the word count as the control condition	In 1996, six of the best-attended attractions in Nebraska were Fort Robinson State Park, Scotts Bluff National Monument, Arbor Lodge State Historical Park & Museum, Carhenge, Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer, and Buffalo Bill Ranch State Historical Park.	58%
<b>Scannable layout</b> using the same text as the control condition in a layout that facilitated scanning	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: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Fort Robinson State Park (355,000 visitors)</li><li>• Scotts Bluff National Monument (132,166)</li><li>• Arbor Lodge State Historical Park &amp; Museum (100,000)</li><li>• Carhenge (86,598)</li><li>• Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer (60,002)</li><li>• Buffalo Bill Ranch State Historical Park (28,446).</li></ul>	47%
<b>Objective language</b> 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).	27%
<b>Combined version</b> using all three improvements in writing style together: concise, scannable, and objective	In 1996, six of the most-visited places in Nebraska were: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Fort Robinson State Park</li><li>• Scotts Bluff National Monument</li><li>• Arbor Lodge State Historical Park &amp; Museum</li><li>• Carhenge</li><li>• Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer</li><li>• Buffalo Bill Ranch State Historical Park</li></ul>	124%

## Marriott Library webpage example

by Tracy Medley

**Before:** Patrons asked what was offered & struggled to find content

## 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 & 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.

**After:** Bulleted lists & bold

## Offerings

- **Four desktop computers** and **two group study rooms**, which can be reserved (rooms 3400C and 3400D) for student use.
- **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.

“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

lib.utah.edu/ou-support/writing-for-the-web

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