

How to write well for the web

Writing for the web is very different from writing for print. 79% of users scan the page instead of reading word-for-word, possibly because reading from computer screens is 25% slower than from paper.

Essential information to include on your website

- What is your product / what do you do?
- Who do you sell to / what are your prices?
- Why should visitors buy from you / choose your service or product?
- Why choose you over your competitor? Be very specific in describing what sets your firm apart.
- How long have you been in business?
- Your specialities
- How can they contact you / where are you located?

Be concise – write 50% less than in a paper publication

- Stick closely to your topic and make it clear straight away what your proposition is
- Give examples, background information etc in hyperlinks to other pages
- Avoid repetition and excess verbiage – your readers can click away in a second
- Limit the use of metaphors, particularly in headings: users might take you literally and they are often wordy
- Use simple sentence structures
- Try not to have more than about 250 words of text on a page. Web readers devote a lot less attention per word than they would if they were reading a print publication and generally prefer shorter pages.

Be scannable – help people find what they need

- Break text into short sections with breaks in between
- Use clear headings not clever ones - users want to know what a section contains
- Highlight key information carrying words, not whole sentences
- Use bulleted and numbered lists - anything to make the information jump out at the reader.
- Limit each paragraph to one idea and state what it is in the first sentence
- Split long information into multiple pages according to subject if necessary

Be objective – build trust and gain credibility with users

- Write for your audience not for yourself or your company
- Avoid superlatives, vague claims, boasting, exaggerating and self-congratulation
- Present facts clearly and users will decide for themselves what is useful
- State nothing as a fact without presenting evidence
- Avoid advertising talk such as "greatest thing since..." and "state-of-the-art..."

- Avoid Americanisms (such as metaphors like "batting average," "drop back and punt," etc.) and/or Britishisms ("close of play," "sticky wickets"). It may confuse people whose first language is not English.
- Update pages as time goes by to reflect all possible changes. Statistics, numbers, and examples all need to be up to date or your credibility will suffer.

Grammar, Punctuation and Spelling

- Make sure that your spelling and grammar are correct. Good grammar and spelling gives your site an air of professionalism. Use your computers spellchecker.
- Keep the exclamation marks to a minimum.
- Avoid using too many –ly words and use “that” sparingly, if at all.
- Use conversational language. Don't alienate potential clients with industry jargon.

Begin at the End

Use the "Who, What, Where, When, Why, and How" formula when writing for the web. This is called the inverted pyramid. Summarise first. Put the main points of your document in the first paragraph, so that readers scanning your pages will not miss your point.

Design your website's homepage so one of the links off the home page features a complete company profile, including how long you have been in business, your services and specialties. You should also have a section featuring short profiles of the principals in the company. Keep the bios between 100 and 150 words.

If it's appropriate, create a page outlining your fees, payment policy, and other details people need to know when doing business with you. If you require a retainer upon signing a new contract, spell it out. Be transparent.

Writing to be found by Search Engines

More than half of web users rely on search engines to navigate pages. The text on your website is one of the important aspects of website promotion and good ranking's. The search engine spiders are like humans - they determine the subject matter of a web page based on what they read.

Points to consider when writing search engine friendly text:

- Think like a reader: What terms would you use if you were looking for a page like yours? Do some research and find the most likely keywords and keyword phrases that internet surfers would use.
- Make the first word of the title the most important descriptor of the page and place keywords at the beginning of paragraphs and headings. Users often scan down long lists of titles to choose pages.
- Make sure that these keywords are well represented in your copy without losing readability.
- Keywords should not be "stuffed" in the text, they should be part of it as all other ideas expressed in it are. A search engine does not like text that doesn't make sense.
- Use of various word combinations (ultimately new key phrases), plural, singular, changing keyword proximity is a good technique to target additional key phrases.
- Don't overuse keywords – search engines may penalise you. As a general rule, only once every 14 words.
- Write your text for people first and for search engines second.