

# Writing Winning Web Content

By BNET Editorial

published on BNET.com 10/15/2007

Writing well for the Web requires an understanding of Web readers' habits. A typical visitor to a Web site will decide whether or not to continue within four or five seconds. You need to bear this in mind when preparing Web content. It is more difficult to read on a screen than from paper. Both the writing and the layout need to be simpler, and more straightforward than print would require. To boost the odds of your content being read, focus on:

- Shorter sentences, paragraphs and documents
- An emphasis on punchy, descriptive headings and summaries
- Larger font sizes and easy-to-read sans serif fonts
- Straightforward, factual prose

## What You Need to Know

---

### Do people read differently on the Web?

Rather than carefully read every sentence, people reading online tend to scan sentences and paragraphs. They move quickly across the text, always in a rush to find the content they need. Web readers are very fact-oriented. They rarely read the Web for pleasure—they want to do business, to be educated, to find out something. In turn, they prefer to read content that gets to the point quickly.

People like reading short documents with links to more detailed information, which they will also read as they deem necessary. If a document is long and people really have no choice but to read it all, studies show a significant number of them will print it. In general, however, long documents on a Web site go unread.

### Why do so many people dismiss Web content as poor quality?

People don't trust the content they read on the Web because so many Web sites they visit lack good publishing standards. The Web gives everyone access to the tools of publishing. Yet simply giving someone a word processor does not make that person a good writer.

Too many Web sites lack proper editing standards. They also transfer documents originally prepared for a print medium directly to the Web. This may save money initially, but if people don't read the content, it's pointless. Some Web sites deliberately try to mislead people with their content. All that does is leave a permanently poor impression.

## Can I learn to write for the Web?

Learning to write well is never easy, no matter what the medium is. However, writing for the Web requires concentrating on the facts. You don't need flowery prose. Instead, you must be able to communicate the really important information in as few words as possible. No, it's not easy to do; but, with practice, most people can master the basics.

## What to Do

---

### Know the Importance of *Being Read*

The critical connection between writing and reading is not always considered. Far too many organizations create volumes of content without asking some obvious questions, such as:

- Is anyone interested in reading this content?
- Is it written so it is understandable and easy to read?
- How are we going to let people know that we have just published this content?

Writing is rarely about quantity! It should always be about quality. As the old saying goes, "I wrote you a long letter because I didn't have time to compose a short one." It is easier to write 5,000 words of blather than 500 words that are succinct and focused. For the Web, 500 words are what's needed. Less is definitely more... *so keep it short!*

When writing for the Web, remember that:

- Documents rarely should exceed 1,000 words, and 500-to-700 words is an ideal length;
- Paragraphs should be between 40 and 50 words;
- Try to limit your sentences to no more than 20 words.

## Think About Structure

### Take Care over the Headlines

Headlines are critical to a Web site for two key reasons:

- Because people scan online, they tend to first look at headlines; if they don't attract their attention, then readers won't likely go any further, and

- People rely on search engines, and the most prominent words on a page of search results are the headlines. These are the words that really sell a Web page and convince one to click for more information.

Writing headlines is an art, but here are a few rules to help you get the basics right:

- Keep them short, no longer than five to eight words;
- Make your point clear; for example, “Nasdaq crashes to record low” is more informative than “Apocalypse now for investors!”;
- Use strong, direct language; don’t be sensational, but don’t be vague, either and don’t hedge;
- Don’t deceive the reader; for example, avoid using “Microsoft” in a headline just because you think it will attract more readers;

Remember, a headline’s job is to succinctly tell readers what’s in a document.

## Use Subheads

In longer documents especially subheads are handy tools. They break up any text into more readable chunks that online readers like. Use subheadings every five to seven paragraphs.

## Summarize

Next to the heading, the summary is the most important piece of text. It describes the document, and focuses on the “who, what, where and when” the information contains. Make it descriptive, not wandering or indirect.

## Get Down to Business

“No man but a blockhead ever wrote... except for money,” Samuel Johnson declared. Sound advice. Writing is not easy but somebody has to do it. The first rule of writing is reading: If asked to write a technical paper, read how other people write them. Review what already appears on your own Web site, on competitors’ sites, and in industry journals. Find a style that works well and copy it; use its techniques and approach to structure. Keep putting words on paper, even if they don’t read well. Having words to ponder always beats having to stare at a blank screen. *Above all, don’t ever put your own name on someone else’s words.* That’s plagiarism and can prompt embarrassment if not legal woes. But never feel ashamed of emulating good quality writing and learning from it.

## Learn How to Edit Your Own Words

Even if you have an editor, you still want to prepare a polished, well-written draft. Here are some steps to follow:

- Get a first draft written, since it's always the most difficult step; then save the draft;
- Make the font size larger so that the text stands out more—or double-space each line;
- Leave your draft sit a while after completing it; a fresh look is the first step toward improvement;
- Read the draft as if someone else wrote it, and be a severe critic: Is it written in a way that the reader can easily understand? What is the writer trying to say here? Is this sentence or paragraph necessary? Are all the essential facts covered?;
- Read your words aloud; the ear will often catch what the eye overlooks;
- First drafts are often too long. In revising it, cut ruthlessly—as much as by half;
- Whatever the assignment, always ask how many words are required; if you are not given a word count, then set one yourself, but keep it as low as possible.

A primary function of editing is to whittle a long draft into shape. As George Orwell advised, “If it is possible to cut a word, always cut it.” We all have pet phrases that we love to put into sentences whenever we can. They may sound good to the writer but add nothing to the meaning of what’s being communicated. The Web needs functional writing. Get to the point as quickly as you can. Then stop.

## Explore Collaborative Writing

Computers and the Internet make collaborative writing far easier. As a result, it has become an increasingly popular approach to preparing Web site content. Collaborative writing works well if:

- The writers know and respect each other;
- They spend time to understand the objectives of the writing project and reach agreement on such necessary matters as its style, tone, and length;
- Much of the content to be written will benefit from the input of multiple disciplines;
- People can be given defined segments to write, and/or their respective skills will strengthen overall content—for example, one person understands the subject well while another is a strong, able writer;
- There are professional processes in place that will help promote collaboration.

## What to Avoid

---

### You Forget the Needs of the Reader

Always keep your audience in mind when writing: Are your readers sales reps? Technicians? Support staffers? Customers? Investors? Will they understand what you are writing about? Don’t write to please yourself—write to please your reader, and be clear and precise.

Far too many Web sites fail to consider who their readers are and simply add content for its own sake. If you ignore the needs of your readers, then your readers will ignore what you write. If, after reading the heading and summary, the average Web reader hasn't understood what exactly you are trying to tell to them, chances are they will click the "Back" button. Web site readers are ruthless about hoarding their time.

## You Dump Everything onto Your Web Site

Translating a 40-page document into HTML format is a simple task; persuading someone to read it all is another matter entirely. Just try reading a lengthy PDF file on a screen, for instance. It's often a painful experience! How many of your customers have read that PowerPoint(r) presentation you translated into HTML? Not many! Just as writing for broadcast is different than writing for the printed page, so is writing for the Web.

The Web is not a dumping ground for content. You might have 50,000 documents, but only 5,000 are suitable for your Web site. Publishing the other 45,000 only wastes your readers' time—so don't do it!

## You Edit Sloppily

It is all but impossible to create quality content without its being professional edited. No matter how talented a writer may be, content will always benefit by being reviewed by an editor. As the saying goes, "Everyone needs an editor, and that *includes* editors."

## Where to Learn More

---

### Books:

Camp, Lindsay. *Can I Change Your Mind? The Craft and Art of Persuasive Writing*. A & C Black, 2007.

Garrand, Timothy. *Writing for Multimedia and the Web, Third Edition: A Practical Guide to Content Development for Interactive Media*. Focal Press, 2006.

Jeney, Cynthia L. *Writing for the Web: A Practical Guide*. Prentice Hall, 2006.

McGovern, Gerry. *Killer Web Content*. A & C Black, 2006.

## **Web Site:**

Titta, Catherine, "Writing Well for the Web": [www.webreference.com/content/writing](http://www.webreference.com/content/writing)

Copyright © 2007 CNET Networks, Inc. All Rights Reserved.