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## Writing Tips for Your Web Site

### General tips for writing for the web:

#### Understanding your users:

- Make sure you understand the interests, culture, needs, and limitations of your users in order to write for them
- Don't talk down to your audience – or up (e.g., too much technical/industry jargon if they aren't in the industry)
- Stick close to your audience's knowledge base, needs, and likely technology

#### Use clear wording throughout site (especially in page titles, headings, navigation, and links)

- Use simple, most commonly understood, short, clear words (plainspoken language)
- The more concrete your text (clear, basic words), the better ranking in search engines (because these are the words users search by)
- Write in short, clear, straightforward sentences (clear short blurbs; enticing tone, clear descriptions)
- Get to the point quickly and explain what's in it for the user
- No jargon/cute/technical/fancy/overly difficult/specialized meaning of a word (people can get lost and give up)
- Avoid sarcasm, subtle word play, clichés (may not cross cultures)
- Be informative - if it is easy to find answers then people trust and revisit site

## **Tone and language:**

- Use active rather than passive verbs
- Use customer-focused language (label sections and categories according to the value they hold for the customer and words commonly used by the customer). Ask customers what they look for when they need a particular type of information.
- Most people prefer a conversational tone to a formal tone because it's more personal and direct.
- Use consistent tone throughout your site, in your e-mails, and in your advertising. Readers appreciate this. They know what to expect.

## **Using style standards:**

- What's the right usage (spelling, capitalization, grammar)? Two options:
  - AP (Associated Press) Style Guide (use, e.g., 'e-mail', 'Web site', 'on-line') and a lot of optional punctuation like commas and hyphens (quick AP guide: [www.bu.edu/com/writingprgm/ap\\_styleguide1.pdf](http://www.bu.edu/com/writingprgm/ap_styleguide1.pdf)).
  - "common" or "down" style--the way you see these words most often on the Web ('email', 'website', 'online') - also tends to eliminate all but the most critical punctuation.
- Decide on a style and use it consistently throughout site. You may want to create a style guide for your site.
- Don't use all lowercase letters for titles, categories, and other links (not only is it not scannable as mixed case, but also invariably you'll need to break with the style standard for a proper name, which will look inconsistent)
- Use all uppercase letters sparingly or not at all as a formatting style (not as easy to read and can make page look busy or loud)

## **Marketing a product, service, or your company:**

- Sell the benefits not the features – good content sells itself
- Avoid marketing lingo/empty hype/self-congratulatory statements (this is the leading cause of lost sales - the more florid the description the more users tune them out)
- Give people the facts and let them come to their own conclusions
- Be honest - credibility is important on the web

- Highlight noteworthy accomplishments humbly. Mention only recent and relevant noteworthy awards
- Appear knowledgeable without coming on too strong

### **Streamline wording:**

- Users read on average about 100 words on interior pages and 10-20 (to the point) words on home page. Focus the initial page on information everyone needs.
- Add 100-250 words per non-home page (try for 400 maximum if need additional wording) (articles are an exception)
- Users will spend most of their 25-35 seconds on a page figuring out where to go next, not reading word-for-word
- Omit any unnecessary words (they can make the site seem daunting)
- Goal: write 25 to 50% of what you would normally write for printed material (benefits: reduces noise level, makes useful content more prominent, shortens page (less scrolling), increases how much is actually read). Craft content to convey the maximum amount of information in as few words as possible.
- Avoid repeating content (reduces their impact and clutters page). Instead feature each item clearly in one place (exception: repeat items that belong in multiple categories or include links to the same page but offer synonyms that represent words your users use to describe the content).

### **Create easily scannable content:**

- In general, make sure that your content is easy for readers to skim through to find pertinent information. People scan a page's content first and sniff out the main points in a matter of seconds then they decide whether or not to read more
- Imagine there's no text at all--only headings and subheadings. What would you say? Make them the story. (It might be the only thing a reader skims.)
- State your topic at the beginning of each:
  - sentence
  - link
  - paragraph
  - list

- Avoid dense, unstructured text (this is a major turnoff - implies hard work to extract information). Instead use headers, bulleted lists, and bold faced text to structure page.
- Divide information into appropriate and manageable groups
- Start with the conclusion so that users can read first line or two on a page and still get main point. Then give supporting facts.
- Emphasize key points in larger font/bold (avoid bolding items that are not relevant to user's scanning interests)
- If people don't immediately see anything of significance or feel overwhelmed they leave

### **Paragraphs:**

- Include no more than about three sentences per paragraph (5 sentences maximum). Use bulleted lists whenever possible. The shorter, the better.
- Readers like short, insightful, information-packed stories.
- Only one topic/idea per paragraph
- People should be able to read the initial topic sentence for each paragraph and decide if they want to keep reading that paragraph.

### **Reading level:**

- Write to an 8th grade reading level
- Write to a 6th grade level for the product, home, and category pages
- Web users with low literacy may be as high as 30% (43% of Americans read at an 8th grade level)
- Make low literacy a priority especially if targeting a general audience
- Older people have a lower educational level
- To lower the level of reading difficulty of your text:
  - Use simpler words with fewer syllables
  - Use shorter sentences and paragraphs

## Give users what they want up front:

- Don't hide any information the user might want - e.g., customer support phone numbers (may be best to display prominently on every page), shipping rates, prices, etc.

## Where to get your message across about purpose of site/what company does:

- **Add a tagline** directly next to the site ID (logo/company title) in the header area of each page. This is read by the visitor as a description of the whole site and is the only place on the page where users most expect to find a concise statement of the site's purpose. Use a tagline that is:
  - clear and informative
  - around six to eight words long
  - conveys differentiation and a clear benefit
  - personable, unique, lively, clever (as long as it's clear)
  - don't use a motto (e.g., "we bring good things to life")
- Add a mission statement, displayed in a prominent block on the home page, which is a terse description of the site. Make sure it is visible without scrolling. You can add colorful bullets and/or section titles if it is wordy and bold keywords to make it scannable by your visitors. Write just enough to get the point across – the shorter, the better. Only mention a maximum of four great features. Don't use the mission statement as a welcome blurb or promotion. It's very important to test this with someone who doesn't know what the site or company is about to make sure your overall message is getting through.
- Can also add testimonial quote(s) that help to explain company and/or site
- Word the navigation menu titles and headings to help explain company and/or site (but do not use jargon/uncommon words in your navigation to avoid confusion).

## Suggestions for standard web pages:

### Home page:

- Add a mission statement near the top of the page to explain what your company offers and why you stand out (see explanation in “Where to get message across about purpose of site/what company does” section).
- Use focused bullet points and images of products/services
- In general, a home page must answer four questions users will have when they enter your site (and answer it at a glance, correctly, unambiguously, and with very little effort):
  1. What is this? (What site have I arrived at?)
  2. What do they have here? (What does the company do?)
  3. What can I do here? (What products/services are offered – especially what are the new products/developments). Enable visitors to find good, relevant stuff in seconds – be able to answer: what are my choices and how can I get to the most relevant section for me?
  4. Why should I be here – and not somewhere else (online or offline)? Communicate immediate value from users' point of view and explain what benefits the company can offer. Also explain how this company differs from competitors.

### About page:

- Highly recommended (trust and credibility are major issues on the web - users need to know who's behind a company, how it's funded, and whether it's credible). This is the most trust enhancing element you can add.
- This is an opportunity to cement a company's identity and reinforce credibility. Shine light on talents and give highlights of products/services offered, give history, mission, vision statement, information about key people in the organization
- Key information readers typically look for:
  1. Information about the top executive or official
  2. Organization's philosophy
  3. Full contact information (physical address and phone number) - people are frustrated when not readily available. Revealing full

contact information is one of the leading markers that people use to judge a company's trustworthiness.

#### 4. Historical timeline and milestones

### **Contact page:**

- Provide physical mailing address, telephone and fax numbers, email address, link to directions/map page, online form for requesting information (include privacy policy about email usage).
- If you provide an online 'feedback' mechanism, specify the purpose of the link and whether it will be read by customer service or the webmaster

### **Frequently Asked Questions page:**

- Based on most common questions asked of receptionist/employees. Gives space for thorough answers.
- Make sure they aren't QWWPWA's - questions we wish people would ask
- Keep them up to date (ask customer service/technical support frequently for any new questions that are coming up)
- Provide candid answers

### **Product (or Service) pages:**

- In general:
  - Use common, everyday terms
  - No fluff or unnecessary words
  - No jargon or made-up words
  - Add meaningful illustrations
  - Allow people to enlarge photos (fill 1024x768 screen)
  - No wasted graphics/photos (unrelated/purely visual)
- What to avoid with illustrations:
  - Images too small to show details
  - Images not zoomed in enough
  - Images zoomed in too far to show context

- Images that don't show size comparison (if small, add maybe a coin - or add line ruler)
- Images that don't show item from critical vantage points
- If item is worn by people, show picture of it worn