Henwood, Dawn. (2007). Creating High-Performance Web Pages. A Writing Guide for IT Professionals (pp. 140-153). Oxford University Press.

Chapter 8

Creating High-Performance Web Pages

It's quite possible, thought Sean, that Joyline is insane. Or at least mildly mentally incapacitated. She's asked me to create a product description for the new website, but she's only allowed me 300 words. How on earth am I going to encapsulate the amazing functionality of this product in that miniature space? After all, we're talking about a product so revolutionary that it's soon going to make the Blackberry look as antiquated as a rotary telephone.

Sean could take a lesson from David Letterman's Top Ten lists. Now that we live in the age of the electronic text, we also live in the age of writing-by-list. Traditional paragraphs like this one are becoming obsolete in electronic media. To overcome his dilemma, Sean will need to adjust his assumptions about the structure his product description will take, the writing style he'll use, and the amount of detail he'll include.

Although many web developers distinguish between the copy (the text for the site) and the design (the graphical elements, general layout, and structure of the site), the really good developers know that it's all of a piece. On the web, to separate writing from design is like trying to view a painting apart from the canvas.

Drawing on the rhetorical principles we've examined, the following sections deliver a set of practical tips for creating compelling online content.

Tip #1—Write for users, not readers

No one actually "reads" online—at least not the way you'd curl up in a comfortable armchair and read a novel or magazine. Instead, we use web pages the way we'd use an encyclopedia. "Surfing" only partially describes how move from page to page and site to site. "Hunting" and "foraging" are more apt terms. That's why the age of Googling has spawned a new industry dealing specifically with how to make sites show up more often in search-engine results.

People use writing on the web the same way they use a computer program. If you want to attract and retain their attention, then, you'll need to write for users, not readers. One way to achieve this is to pepper your text with keywords that people are likely to use when searching for information on your topic. On a more general level, however, writing for users means thinking of your pages not as *content*-driven but rather as *function*-driven.

Think of users as wealthy big-game hunters on a guided expedition. They want to be taken to the lion as directly as possible so they can get a clear shot, bag their prize, and be back to the camp in time for cocktails. They tend

to be so impatient that they'll allow a web page mere seconds to satisfy their needs. Effective pages, then, need to deliver the goods in great haste. As Irene Hammerich and Claire Harrison, authors of *Developing Online Content,* note: "The key to a seductive website is immediate gratification" (2002, p. 38).

Communications consultant Ginny Redish (2004) suggests you provide such gratification by considering the user's goal in visiting the site. (Remember the first principles of the TACT method: to think about the *type* of document your *audience* requires to achieve particular goals within a particular *context.*) Following are some of Redish's recommendations for producing four distinct varieties of web pages:

Home pages should orient the reader to the site. They should clearly identify its purpose and structure, without a lot of busy chitchat to distract the reader. Because people want to figure out where they need to go and then move along as quickly as possible, it's more accurate to think of your home page as a doorway than as a lobby. Avoid, therefore, the temptation to welcome the reader, indulge in self-promotion, or philosophize about your organization's "mission." As usability consultant Steve Krug quips, "Happy talk must die" (2000, p. 46). Instead of wasting time in idle chitchat, sum up the essence of the organization in a catchy, pithy phrase, or "tag line." Here are some effective tag lines of real companies to ponder as examples:

- IronSentry: Simplifying Email Management
- Premiere Van Lines: The Art of Moving
- LimeLight Communications Group: Delivering Inspiring Speakers
- Rapid Relay: Ground Transportation Connections

Navigation pages should concentrate on presenting clear, straightforward menus, with as little additional content as possible. Readers in this phase of the information hunt aren't yet ready to digest large passages. At this stage, says Redish, users want simply to skim and choose, so extra details will only encumber them.

The main principle is to focus on one function at a time. Just because we live in the era of multi-tasking doesn't mean people enjoy having to split their focus between multiple activities. Base your page design and content on the knowledge that web users are happiest when they're single-tasking.

Content pages should, like navigation pages, allow users to skim and choose, but for a different purpose. Once information-hunters reach a content page, they're ready to read the material you have to present, but they're still seeking the ideas or data that interest them. They hop from keyword to keyword, heading to heading, pausing only to grab the minimal information they need to meet their objective (to find their answer, solve their problem, or make their purchase).

As we'll see, it requires thoughtful structuring to create so-called "sticky" pages that attract and retain users' attention and help them obtain the information they need. Although it's often tempting to "repurpose" a paper document simply by loading it into an HTML editor or a content-repurposing

software program, making the transition from page to screen requires not cosmetic adjustments but profound changes.

Forms pages should make it easy for users to input information. Here, the typical user situation is reversed; rather than trying to convince users to accept your content, you need to persuade them to give you the content you want. The realm of form design lies outside the parameters of this book, but a few basic principles are worth mentioning here:

- A forms page is not a navigation page or a content page.
- The more clearly you spell out your purpose in requesting the information, the more likely your user is to supply it.
- Conciseness and consistency make forms easy to fill out.
- The "personality" of your website comes across through the forms you design just as surely as it does through the other types of content you create.

Tip #2—Create a web persona, not a web page

Just as your email messages engender an online personality, so do your web pages, especially the written content in them. Even though design and text work together, "content is king in the user's mind," according to usability researchers Jakob Nielsen and John Morkes. Drawing on laboratory research, they explain: "When asked for feedback on a web page, users will comment on the quality and relevance of the content to a much greater extent than they will comment on navigational issues or the page elements that we consider to be 'user interface'" (Morkes & Nielsen, 1997).

Like people, websites can appear friendly or standoffish, warm or cool, genuine or phony. One way to evaluate the perceived emotional sincerity of your web persona is to read your writing aloud. Does it feel natural and easy? Would you feel comfortable delivering it as a phone script or saying it to someone in conversation? You'll know your web persona sounds real if you're able to answer "yes" to such questions.

Assessing tone is a good first step, but creating a persona that users will like and trust requires that you do more. *Ethos* is everything. Simply indicating the source of the site's content can help greatly in this regard. Remember also that the "About Us" section of any website is the most obvious spot for users to go to scrutinize your credibility. On this page, and throughout the site, you can create rapport by referring to your company or organization as "we" rather than, let's say, "Smith & Smith Solutions." Employee photos and profiles also help users perceive your company or organization as a "you" rather than an "it." Even as small a detail as including the name and contact information of your webmaster can humanize your website.

How do you know what kind of personality characteristics, besides sincerity and trustworthiness, your site should convey? Before you start profiling your persona, pay a trip back to the drawing board to revisit your audience

analysis. The clearer picture you have of your users, the easier you'll find it to construct a character to meet them.

When you're thinking about the characteristics you'd like users to ascribe to your site, you may find it useful to consider the following question: if your site were a restaurant, what kind of *maitre d'* would you want to greet your guests? If your users come from a laid-back, easygoing group, then maybe you want a bright-eyed, energetic host who approaches customers with a wide smile and a "Hi there? How you doin' today?" If, on the other hand, your users tend to be sophisticated and reserved (perhaps even skeptical), then you're probably looking for somebody quite different. Instead of bubbly, you want self-assured and polite, someone who's friendly but respectful.

Here's a pair of examples to demonstrate how two sites can embody dramatically different personas in the way they approach their users.

Example #1

University Copy Centre

> Our computers run 24/7 so you don't have to run all over town trying to print that essay that's due tomorrow morning. You'll find us at the top of the escalator in the Student Centre. Just follow your nose to Joe's Java Hut—we're right next door.

Example #2

Bridgeway Business Centre

> Clients have access to computers with Internet 24 hours a day. The centre is located at 602 Canal Street, across from the Bridgeway-Rushton Mall.

As you can see, the examples communicate the same essential message—that the copy shop in question has computers that are available any time of day or night. However, does one sound friendlier to you than the other? Based on the tone of the text, what assumptions do you make about the author of the copy? If you were surfing from site to site looking for somewhere you could print an essay, which of the two copy centres would you be more likely to visit?

Notice the way that the above examples create a definite persona for the implied user as well as for the site itself. For a web text to succeed, it must imply a user role that's "playable" (Coney & Steehouder, 2000). The text for the University Copy Centre site, for instance, assumes that people visiting the site are students who need to print essays. What if, however, the user is not an essay-writer at all? What if she's a Physics major who needs to do some late-night Internet research to help her understand an upcoming lab? Would she be able to picture herself using the services of the University Copy Centre, which include Internet access? If not, she may keep surfing until she finds another business that seems more ready to meet her needs, even though the campus option would actually be more convenient for her.

Tip #3—Follow the journalist, not the essay writer

Since web users peruse pages at a frantic pace, and since even the most diligent among them tend to be reluctant scrollers, smart writers organize material as they would for an email: they put the most important idea up front.

Writing instructors are fond of referring to this arrangement as an element of traditional "journalistic style." Pick up today's newspaper and you'll see this style in any news article (but not an opinion column or a feature article). The most important facts come directly under the headline, in an opening sentence known as the "lead."

As journalists know, however, simply drawing in readers at the beginning of a story doesn't guarantee they'll linger to hear the end. You have to keep hooking and re-hooking them as the story progresses. William Horton (1997), author of *Secrets of User-Seductive Documents*, maintains that electronic documents such as web pages must offer sequential incentives to users so that they'll persist in reading. You need to figure out how to lure users on from line to line.

Horton emphasizes transitions and structure, arguing that a clear sense of the direction of your thought will help readers eagerly anticipate what's coming next. He recommends linking an idea at the end of one paragraph to the first idea of the next, setting up a consistent enticement-reward system for readers.

Tip #4—Structure your content in chunks, not paragraphs

Laboratory studies have shown that it takes readers 25 per cent more time to process text on a screen than it does text on a page (Nielsen 1997). Researchers once blamed poor screen resolution, prompting a wave of new, supposedly easy-to-read fonts designed especially for the screen. (Georgia and Verdana were two of the most popular.) However, subsequent studies have shown that these new fonts have not improved onscreen reading speeds (Boyarski et al. 1998).

We can compensate for slower reading in several ways. The first strategy is to present your information in "chunks" of easy-to-locate, easy-to-digest units. That way, users can select the pieces of information that interest them and read those pieces in whichever sequence they choose.

You can visually cue web surfers to recognize chunks of information. To separate one chunk from another, you can use bulleted lists, extra white space, horizontal rules, or differing fonts. Some of these cues are subtle, but they have an impact on the way a visitor navigates your material.

It's important that you don't miscue your reader by visually signalling that information belongs to a chunk when it really doesn't. For instance, consider the following example from a (fictitious) site promoting a telecommunications company:

Last year, more than 200 new clients took advantage of our Prime Partner services. These include the following:

- Unlimited long distance calls
- 10% discount on high-speed Internet
- Free text messaging with any Silver or Gold wireless plan
- $50 gift certificate to use at any of our retail outlets
- Don't forget that we've waived the enrollment fee for the month of August. To take advantage of this offer now, click here to access the online registration form.

If the aim here is to persuade potential clients to become Prime Partners, then the person who wrote the copy may be disappointed. By lumping the enrollment instructions together with the list of specific services, the writer risks confusing—and therefore losing—the user.

Imagine this scenario. Let's say you've already researched the Prime Partner plan, and you've come to the website looking specifically for an online enrollment form. (In other words, like most users, you're out to perform a mission, not just wandering for recreation.) Based on visual cues, you might assume that all of the bulleted items describe services and skip the entire list.

On the other hand, someone who doesn't know anything about the Prime Partner deal might be momentarily thrown off balance by the abrupt shift in the final point. From the point of view of the web writer, this is hazardous because a confused user does not tend to be a trusting user. By appearing disorganized, the writer undermines the site's credibility.

Tip #5—Pay careful attention to headings

Once you've grouped your ideas into manageable chunks, you need to provide clear labels for those units, normally in the form of headings.

It never fails to amaze me just how few writers use headings effectively. Many authors seem to view them as purely ornamental, as if it's nice to have one or two just for appearance's sake. Headings, however, serve more than one important function. For readers coping with information overload (that's most of us), headings provide convenient footholds for navigating rapidly through a text. By setting up expectations as to what's coming, they also enable users to read selectively. Employing headings effectively is one of the simplest ways I know to earn an audience's respect and gratitude.

On the web, headings perform as vital a role as headlines do in newspapers. Marketers tell us that we live in an "attention economy," in which the main resource in demand is time—the time readers and listeners have to attend to the continual avalanche of information. To persuade users to invest precious attention in web copy, create headings that are descriptive, concise, and parallel.

Descriptive headings let the user know exactly what's next on the agenda. They enable busy "readers" to fulfill their goal, which is to avoid

reading whenever possible. Like descriptive subject lines for email messages, descriptive headings use precise, concrete language, as in the following examples:

Nondescript heading	Descriptive heading
The current situation	Current contract with AMP Cable
History	Past attempts to reduce development time
Qualifications	Springwater's experience designing POS systems
Background	Why we need another Level II secretary

Whenever the genre and format allow it, I'd recommend you capture your reader's attention with headings that indicate exactly the content to follow. If you're having trouble converting a conventional, bland heading to something more accurate and captivating, you might find it helpful to express your headings initially as questions rather than phrases.

Let's take a brief detour to the land of report-writing to see how this tactic works. Imagine that Lina, leader of the Product Development team, is writing a report for her boss, Stephan, on how to improve communication between freelance technical writers and software developers. The preliminary headings she conceives for her report might look like this:

- History of the problem
- Analysis
- Recommendations

Lina quickly realizes, however, that these headings don't give Stephan a clue about the content of her report. As a first step toward making her headings more descriptive, she tries posing them as a series of questions:

- Why do we need to improve communication between technical writers and developers?
- What has been done about the communication problem in the past?
- What are some new solutions we could try?
- What are the pros and cons of each solution?
- Which is the best solution?
- How can we implement the solution?

Now Lina has delineated a much clearer structure for her report. She's shown Stephan an obvious path from problem to solution so that he's not left wondering, "So what? Why should I care about any of this? Why do I need to read this?" Her next step is to turn her questions into succinct phrases. She

revises her headings along with the other aspects of her report, and produces these results:

Causes of communication barriers

Past attempts to overcome communication barriers

Possible ways to improve communication
- hire writers earlier
- recruit writers with technical backgrounds
- require writers to work on-site
- encourage writers and developers to socialize

Changing our recruitment strategy to improve communication

As you can see from Lina's case, headings evolve along with a document. As your ideas change and develop, your headings should too. You've probably also noticed that, as Lina's thinking about her topic became clearer, she developed subheadings. Even when circumstances indicate that you should use conventional, pre-fabricated headings (as some organizational templates require), you can usually take the liberty of breaking down those familiar labels into more descriptive subheadings. By so doing, you'll respect your audience's established reading habits but avoid sacrificing clarity.

Fortunately, when you're writing for the web, your audience expects you to be innovative. Web users tend to be rather jaded. They're looking for original, attractive headings to grab their attention. Crawford Kilian (1999) says that web writers need to deliver users the "high joltage" information that delivers "the simple jolt of being readily understandable in one quick glance" (p. xviii). Strategically placed, carefully worded headings can go far toward creating that desired effect.

Concise headings capture the user's attention with the minimum number of words. Even first-level headings (the largest headings on a page) should contain themselves to a single line. If you make them longer, they'll start to look like body text, not heads, and they'll lose their effectiveness.

To compress your headings, apply the same principles you use to create brief subject lines for your email messages. Avoid articles (*a, an, the*), use concrete language, choose words with few syllables, and make the verbs carry the freight. In many situations, you'll also find you can instantly trim a heading by addressing the reader directly as "you" or by using a personal pronoun instead of the corporate name. As we've seen, using personal pronouns can produce the added benefit of creating a welcoming site persona.

Here are a few examples of wordy headings reduced to more concise forms:

Wordy
The reasons consumers should purchase an extra memory card

Concise
Why you need a memory card

Wordy
Applebaum Computer's Commitment to Quality Customer Service
Concise
We pick up and deliver

Wordy
Inexpensive web hosting solutions for small to medium-sized enterprises
Concise
Low-cost web hosting for small business

Besides being descriptive and concise, headings should also be parallel so that you create a balanced "look and feel," as designers say, and help those jaded users better retain the information.

Parallel headings follow the identical syntax (pattern of word arrangement) throughout a document or web page. For instance, if your first heading begins with a verb that is followed by a noun, then subsequent headings should do the same. In the following examples, you'll see that each of the three headings follow a pattern—noun, preposition, product name:

- Features of the DWX-500 Digital Camera
- User instructions for the DWX-500 Digital Camera
- FAQ about the DWX-500 Digital Camera

By preserving the same syntax in every heading, you make it easier for users to skim and speed-read their way through your website. In this situation, repetition doesn't bore the user. On the contrary, establishing a clear pattern and sticking with it will earn you the user's gratitude. Parallel headings provide users with easy-to-grip toeholds in the text, so they can jump from one section to another. In long texts, they also help unify the writing, something that can be difficult to do online, where you have little control over the order in which your reader processes your sentences.

You may feel that my sample parallel headings above are rather lengthy because they repeat the full name of the product. The repetition is deliberate. Since you can't predict just where in your text a user will jump in or jump out, you must provide clear orientation signals to accommodate different entry and exit points. In the world of hypertext, you can't assume that a reader who enters a piece of writing at the level of a subheading will view the main heading as well.

Tip #6—Build captivating lists

The crucial matter of parallelism applies to bulleted lists as well. It's not just a question of making your page look pretty, although symmetry and balance are indeed important design principles. Research hints that parallelism can

increase persuasiveness. Drawing on insights from cognitive science, University of Maryland professor Jeanne Fahnestock (2003) explains as follows: "When several parallel items are perceived in a series, the second or third items follow a path of construal prepared by the first. They satisfy an immediate expectation. Our minds are constructed to be receptive to repeated verbal or visual forms in any of their possible dimensions" (p.148).

This suggests that simply giving our bulleted lists a parallel structure helps us captivate online readers. Here's an example of a bulleted list that lacks parallel structure. How many different ways can you think of to address this weakness?

Automated banking machines have caused several improvements:

1. faster service
2. more accurate transactions
3. there are no statements to mail

The imbalance occurs in the third point. Whereas the first two points are phrases, the last one is a complete sentence. As is common, the lack of grammatical parallelism indicates a larger, conceptual problem. The focus of the argument the list presents is actually divided. Whereas the first two items take the point of view of the customer (who is able to take advantage of faster, more accurate service), the last item abruptly shifts the point of view to the bank (to whose advantage it is to reduce mailing costs). Here are a couple of possible rewrites that overcome the problem. (You have likely thought of other possibilities, too.)

Revision 1

Automated banking machines have caused several improvements:

1. faster service
2. more accurate transactions
3. cost-effective electronic statements

Revision 2

Automated banking machines have caused several improvements:

1. customers obtain faster service
2. customers receive more accurate transactions
3. customers get up-to-date electronic statements

These two revisions resolve the perspective problem in two different ways. Revision 1 creates unity by viewing the advantages from a global perspective, whereas Revision 2 adopts the customer's perspective throughout. While Revision 2 exhibits a sharper focus, I'm sure you've noticed that it's also rather wordy. Here's how an additional revision to Revision 2 might appear:

Revision 2A

Automated banking machines deliver customers the following advantages:

1. faster service
2. more accurate transactions
3. up-to-date electronic statements

One final word about creating effective bulleted lists. To link a bulleted list to the text that precedes it, you need a colon, which performs a trumpeter role, announcing forthcoming information that will illustrate or support the point. To sound the fanfare properly, the colon must appear at the end of a complete thought, expressed as either a heading or a complete sentence, but not as a sentence fragment.

It's not always easy to recognize this distinction. In fact, in creating Revision 2A, I fell into the very trap I'm cautioning you to avoid. Here's what my first attempt looked like:

Automated banking machines have improved customer service by providing:

1. faster service
2. more accurate transactions
3. up-to-date electronic statements

What's the matter here? To spot the irregular punctuation usage, substitute a period for the colon at the end of the introductory statement. It's obvious now that the thought is incomplete. The final revision rectifies this breach of Standard Edited Written English.

Tip #7—Follow through on information design

Because we predict future behaviour based on past behaviour, we tend to be most comfortable with people who act predictably. Thus, we need to make sure that we enact a given web persona consistently by monitoring a wide range of factors that come under the umbrella of "information design." Individual elements include headings, fonts, list formats, word choice, paragraph length, and sentence structure.

Information design principles grow out of the premise that the physical appearance of a text never functions as a mere façade to dress up language. Rather, it embodies written thought, and thus is inseparable from it. The German word for "typeface," *schriftbild*, aptly encapsulates this true nature of writing as a mode of both graphical and linguistic representation (Stöckl 2005, p. 206). Literally translated, *schriftbild* means "writing picture."

To derive the benefits of effective information design, you'll need to begin by considering textual content as contributing to a site's graphical effect. Then, you'll need to expand your notion of that content to cover more than just "copy." Think of "web writing" as referring to any text you see on the screen. That includes text that traditionally falls into the designer's,

(rather than the writer's) jurisdiction, such as the words on navigation buttons, menus, and forms.

Have you ever witnessed someone undermine a professional appearance with one poorly chosen accessory or piece of clothing? Imagine, for instance, that you're a supervisor interviewing a potential employee, and a young woman walks in dressed in a tailored pant suit—and wearing a pair of beat-up basketball shoes on her feet. How seriously do you take her claim that she's "worked closely with executives in a high-profile office for several years"? Like the job candidate's unfortunate smelly sneakers, inconsistent writing—wherever it appears on a web page—can irreparably injure a website's visual impact.

Let's say that you're creating copy for a corporate site, and you refer to the company throughout with the pronouns "we" and "our." Your amiable tone could be seriously compromised if the site designer plugs in ready-made copy for the "About Us" page that refers to "Simplex Solutions Limited," "the company," and "it." Damage to your tone could occur if you refer to the "Customer Care Department" in your text but the contact form refers to the "Customer Service Team." Any inconsistency poses a potential threat because it could distract, confuse, and irritate your impatient users.

If God is indeed in the details, as a famous architect once remarked, then style sheets can help you keep track of divinely important information. Long before Cascading Style Sheets (CSS) for HTML, copy editors started the practice of using paper style sheets to monitor the various design elements, such as heading size, typeface, colour, leading (line spacing), and indentation. In its most basic form, a style sheet simply provides a record of each design decision a writer makes. Most word-processing programs now include a feature that makes it easy to generate a customized style guide as you compose.

Tip #8—Use hyperlinks sparingly, not for special effect

To link or not to link, that is the question—probably the most perplexing one you'll face as a web writer. On one side of the debate, there are those who argue that writers should take advantage of hypertext whenever they can, since hotlinking is what makes online reading differ dramatically from paper-based reading. On the other side of the question, there are those who argue that hyperlinks distract highly distractible users and make online reading more laborious.

A reasonable approach is to choose the middle road. Hyperlinks are valuable because they enable writers to break up text into multi-screen chunks, thus reducing the need for scrolling. Used judiciously, they enrich the multimedia experience. Wouldn't creating web pages without hyperlinks be like purchasing a sports car with all the latest bells and whistles but never leaving your driveway?

To pursue this sports car analogy a bit further, when you're trying to draw the fine line between enough hypertext and too much, consider who your drivers are and where they're driving. If you're writing text for learners (perhaps part of an online tutorial or in-context Help), then your drivers may want to see plenty of road signs, and they may also require the freedom to take their time and explore back roads. In such a situation, it might be advisable to employ hypertext frequently so that users can access definitions of unfamiliar material, get help putting that material in context, and choose a path that suits their individual learning style. If, on the other hand, you're writing text for experienced, high-speed drivers who are in a hurry to get where they're going, then you might want to limit your use of hypertext to avoid slowing them down.

However much you use hypertext, you'll need to reflect on what Hammerich and Harrison term "the rhetoric of departure and arrival" (p. 181). The way you handle hyperlinks conveys an attitude, encouraging users to impute characteristics to your web persona. When you think about it, clicking on a hyperlink requires a leap of faith on the user's part. They have to trust that you won't take them somewhere inappropriate or abandon them by failing to show them the way back. To sustain a reliable persona, it's essential to preserve that trust. You can achieve this, Hammerich and Harrison suggest, by creating courteous departures and "safe landings" (pp. 181–84).

A courteous departure tells users where the hyperlink leads so they know exactly what to expect. Here's a scenario that violates this principle:

Click here to learn more.

Although this link is appropriately brief, it's the online equivalent of a highway exit sign that says, "That-a-way." Could it lead to a more detailed textual description of the product or service? Perhaps. It could also lead to a visual description (photos or diagrams), to client testimonials, or to a contact form. Because "more" is so ambiguous, the signpost sets some of your users up for frustration.

To avoid such confusion, establish clear expectations in the user's mind. If the link leads to a contact form, say so: "Use our convenient contact form to reach us." If it leads to a detailed technical description, then say that: "The technical description provides further details." In either case, avoid keeping the reader in suspense. Spine-tingling mystery is the stuff of detective fiction, not web pages.

Once you've indicated where the link will take users, you need to ensure that those users arrive safely there. That means checking and double-checking for broken or dead links, especially if you're linking to an external site. It also means linking as closely as you can to the specific text or image so that your user doesn't have to plow through layers of material to find the desired piece of information. (Be careful here, though, because "deep linking" to a page below the first level of an external site can raise copyright issues.) In some

cases, you may have to include travel tips ("Scroll down to the bottom of the home page to access the contact list.").

Some of the decisions concerning hyperlinks commonly fall to the so-called web "designer," rather than the writer. However, carrying out effective information design sometimes requires team members to rethink assigned roles—be prepared to work around fences and across gaps in your organization so that the writing and design work in tandem.

Tip #9—Be brief~~, not wordy~~

Think of conciseness as increasing the value of each word you write, and condense, condense, condense.

We've seen how the process of "writing" involves far more than producing letters on a page or screen. In fact, the leaner the text, the more "writing" is required before and after composing takes place. When you're crafting an electronic text, be prepared to invest extra time in revising—and revising, and revising—your words.

Jakob Nielsen recommends that web writing be twice as concise as writing for paper formats. To achieve this, take advantage of all the design elements that HTML facilitates, particularly bulleted lists and tables. Use the techniques presented in Chapter 5 to eliminate chatter, lengthy jargon, and filler phrases.

If you're really struggling to cram your meaning into the extreme space limitations of a web page, then maybe the shoe—that is, the medium—doesn't quite fit. Rather than maiming a longer piece of writing in order to publish it on the web, consider presenting it in PDF format for people to print.

Bonus tip—Apply tips for web writing to ordinary writing

Although you may not believe that web writing lies in your future, thinking like a web writer will help you to succeed in a variety of other writing tasks. Contemporary business communication is adopting many of the techniques of digital rhetoric (such as short sentences, frequent bulleted lists, and leading topic sentences). Nowadays, we're moving toward what we might call an IText style.

Writing theorists have recently coined the label "IText" to describe "the blend of IT and texts" (Gerber et al. 2001, p. 270) that constitutes digital writing, online and offline. ITexts function in unique ways because they occur at the point where written language and the means of producing it merge. Form fuses with communication medium to challenge the traditional ways we define what "writing" means.

In the next chapter, we'll examine more closely the relationships between form, medium, and function, as we explore some writing genres common to the IT workplace.