

***Writing guidelines**

(This is a draft of basic guidelines that I have used to create a framework for companies I've worked with.)

Write for reuse

Write for how users read

Write to reduce cognitive load

Write in the positive

Write in the active voice

Write in plain language

Write for reuse

Content reuse is the practice of writing content in reuseable information components or chunks. Writing content in reusable chunks of information can help establish consistent:

- Page structuring
- Writing style

And writing for reuse also saves money by:

- Reducing the amount of resources dedicated to creating content
- Reducing the resources dedicated to maintenance of content

Titles, headings, sub-headings, labels and copy can all be written for reuse.

To begin thinking about writing for reuse, think about how each of the elements listed above can be reused for:

- Creating different or new page topics and products on the site with the same elements
- Reuse of elements on different devices and screen sizes

Write for how users read

Gov.UK writes “[users only read about 20 to 28% of a web page](#). Where users just want to complete their task as quickly as possible, they skim even more out of impatience.”

Web-user eye-tracking studies show that people tend to ‘read’ a webpage in an [‘F’ shape pattern](#). They look across the top, then down the side, reading further across when they find what they need.

What this means is: put the most important information first. We want to ‘front-load’ the elements or components that act as sign signals in the user scan pattern. Especially,

- Titles
- Headings
- Sub-headings
- Bullet points

Put the most important information first. The words that aid a user in their current on-page task are the most important ones. In addition to front-loading, put key terms where attention tends to drift, at the top of the page, in headings. Simplicity saves attention.

Write to reduce cognitive load

The term “cognitive load” describes the amount of mental resources the user must use in order to operate the system. <https://www.nngroup.com/articles/minimize-cognitive-load/>

Humans like to sum things up quickly, and our online reading patterns reflect that need. Users hunt-and-peck when reading copy on the screen. They look for key indicators in design and copy. Indicators that say “you are in the right spot” for the task you want to do. Copy that is specific, informative, clear and to the point, can help our readers.

In addition to front-loading copy:

- Use short sentences and paragraphs
- Write using shorter words rather than longer
- Use short, clear sentences
- Simpler the text, the less strain

Use clear headings and sub-headings

- Write headlines and titles to inform users of where they are at on the page
- Use sub-heads to direct user attention to the information structure of the page (thematic markers, keywords)
- Use target areas to alert users to the information they want
- Target areas are the horizontal copy above the fold (typically titles and headings) and the vertical left area of the website. An “F” shape.
- For mobile writing, make sure to write the most important information in the first sentence

Use white space

- Use white space to set off important pieces of information (Ex. In email communications)
- Use white space to give a visual break to user's eyes (Ex. Long chunks of information)
- Use white space to facilitate page scanning and searching

Avoid clutter

- Reveal increasing detail about features and topics as the user explores them and needs the information
- Communicate only the essential details, so that users can focus on their own tasks

Write in plain language

“Scanning text is an extremely common behavior for higher-literacy users,”

<https://www.nngroup.com/articles/how-little-do-users-read/>

According to Gov.UK, by the time a child is 5 or 6 years old, they'll use 2,500 to 5,000 common words. Adults still find these words easier to recognize and understand than words they've learned since. Writing in plain language helps people find what they need quickly and absorb it effortlessly.

Simple words help you express your message clearly. Too many complex words are like hurdles in a race, slowing readers down.

“Replacing complex words with simpler words lets your readers concentrate on your content. Using simple and familiar words where possible doesn't insult your readers' intelligence but emphasizes clarity rather than formality. Save longer or complex words for when they are essential.” -- plainlanguage.gov

To help our users navigate our site we use plain language.

Plain language not only helps all users, but it helps us plan and prepare our content for reuse and localization. Simple messages are easier to translate for our global audiences and help keep translation costs down.

Simple messages allow us to apply style and terminologies in a basic and uniform way.

“The most important thing in a written text is that the text must be understood by non-native readers.”

Side Story: Writing for specialists, Gov.UK

Government experts often say that because they're writing technical or complex content for a specialist audience, they don't need to use plain English. This is wrong.

[Research](#) shows that higher literacy people prefer plain English because it allows them to understand the information as quickly as possible.

For example, [research](#) into use of specialist legal language in legal documents found:

80% of people preferred sentences written in clear English - and the more complex the issue, the greater that preference (eg, 97% preferred 'among other things' over the Latin 'inter alia') and the more educated the person and the more specialist their knowledge, the greater their preference for plain English

People understand complex specialist language, but don't want to read it if there's an alternative. This is because people with the highest literacy levels and the greatest expertise tend to have the most to read. They don't have time to pore through reams of dry, complicated prose.

Use this alphabetized list of [simple words and phrases](#) as a resource for your writing. It includes some common complex and overused words in writing.

Resource: [Simple words and phrases](#) list

Write in the positive

Negatives slow down reading comprehension. When a reader comes across a negative, they often must turn it into a positive statement to figure out what it means. (Simpson Casey, 1988 quote)

Try rewriting any sentence that has a negative (more info here) for example, look at these alternatives to these phrases:

- Not many -> few
- Not the same -> different
- Not strong enough -> too weak
- Did not remember -> forgot

Avoid combining no, not, or never with verbs that give off negative vibes (avoid, deny, doubt, fail, lack, etc.).

If you must say no, say why and if appropriate, add a positive comment that speaks to our voice and tone guidelines. Try telling the user the concrete action they can take to get a positive result.

- Don't put tools on the floor -> Put tools on the table
- Don't overload the power supply -> Use only 220 volt power

Write in the active voice

Readers prefer active voice sentences, and we should try to use the active voice in most of our business and transactional writing to communicate our message most effectively. Active voice clearly identifies the action and who is performing that action.

Wherever users are completing actions, we want them active. “Where directness and vigor are desired, try the active voice first.”

When can you use passive?

Use the passive form in these situations:

- When we do not know who performed the action
- When the doer of the action is unimportant
- When we have to maintain parallelism

However, one caution: If adding the name of the person or organization performing the action would make the copy stronger and help our readers, we should try to identify the doer of the action.