

# Writing for the Web

Ryan Johnson

Web Content Editor



# The Dream

Just sort it all out for me.

Name:

Address:

Okay!

# Reality





# Bad Content



Bad Content

Us

When you leave you'll have  
some new tools to improve  
our web content.





# We're here to:

1. Discuss who our users are (and what they need from us).

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4. WRITE REAL GOOD.

# We're here to:

1. Discuss who our users are (and what they need from us).
2. Learn how people use our website.
3. Make our website more accessible.
- ~~4. WRITE REAL GOOD~~
4. Improve our web writing.

# Our web users

Always, always, always clearly define your audience (users) before you write.

Performance Clackamas has helped us focus on our customers, who are also our web users.



Honoring our treasured resources by securing them for generations to come.



Growing prosperity through supporting job growth, affordable housing, business investment and employment lands.



Ensuring community well-being by providing medical care, addressing homelessness and preventing crime.



Building roads and facilities that enhance commercial enterprise and deliver services to all customers.



Building public trust through accountability and transparency by detailing our goals and results.



# We also have user personas.

<http://tinyurl.com/clackamas-personas>



**Gary**  
Retired Veteran



**Adam**  
Home Owner, and  
Political Activist



**Gina**  
Renter, and Community Advocate



**Max**  
Business Owner, and  
County Vendor



**Gary**  
Retired Veteran

Our users are on the website to perform a task.



**Gina**

Renter, and Community Advocate

Our users are on the website to perform a task.

Think of every web visit as a conversation  
initiated by the user in pursuit of  
completing a task.

Is our web content focused on helping the user  
complete their task?

Or is it focused on what we want to say?

How do people use our website?

DATE RANGE: 2015-09-09

ALL VISITS

ALL

DASHBOARD ▾

### Visits Overview (with graph)

#### Evolution over the period



ANNOTATIONS 30 ▾

### Report

- 6027 visits, 5201 unique visitors
- 3 min 4s average visit duration
- 42% visits have bounced (left the website after one page)
- 3.4 actions (page views, downloads, outlinks and internal site searches) per visit
- 0.15s average generation time

### Visits Over Time



ANNOTATIONS 30 ▾

### Pages

PAGE URL PAGEVIEWS

index	1546
des/jobs.html	781
dp.html	686
sheriff/jail.html	646
at/index	670
taxstatements/index	297
dogs/index	303

### Entry Pages

ENTRY PAGE URL

ENTRANCES

sheriff	1172
/index	1013
des	536
at	393
dogs	227
lib	194
socialservices	145
building	141
healthcenters	137
parks	136
wes	135
planning	131
recording	121
/dp.html	108
housingauthority	84
justice	75

Use analytics to focus your content on what users really need.



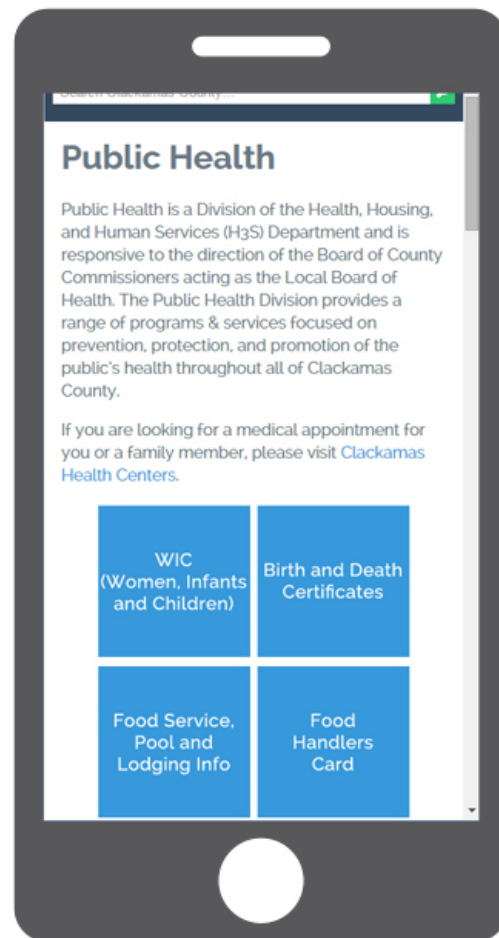
## Pages

PAGE URL	PAGEVIEWS	UNIQUE PAGEVIEWS	BOUNCE RATE	TI
publichealth/index	276	194	33%	00:
publichealth/wic.html	248	165	54%	00:
publichealth/certificates.html	166	122	54%	00:
publichealth/restaurantlicensi...	111	77	52%	00:
publichealth/foodhandler.html	57	53	58%	00:
publichealth/heal.html	110	38	24%	00:
publichealth/environmental.h...	48	32	37%	00:
publichealth/babylink.html	28	24	64%	00:
publichealth/immunizations.h...	31	23	25%	00:
publichealth/faqs.html	33	21	50%	00:
publichealth/contact.html	21	19	100%	00:
publichealth/dentalhealth.html	20	19	43%	00:
publichealth/hiv.html	19	15	85%	00:
publichealth/publichealthnurs...	24	15	33%	00:
publichealth/ehfees.html	14	11	100%	00:
publichealth/emergencyprepa...	13	11	0%	00:
publichealth/inspectioninform...	14	11	0%	00:
publichealth/reportsanddata....	15	11	20%	00:
publichealth/communicable.h...	13	10	100%	00:
publichealth/recipients.html	9	9	0%	00:
publichealth/planreviewguida...	9	8	67%	00:
publichealth/drinkingwater.ht...	9	6	0%	00:
publichealth/howtoconnect...	7	7	0%	00:

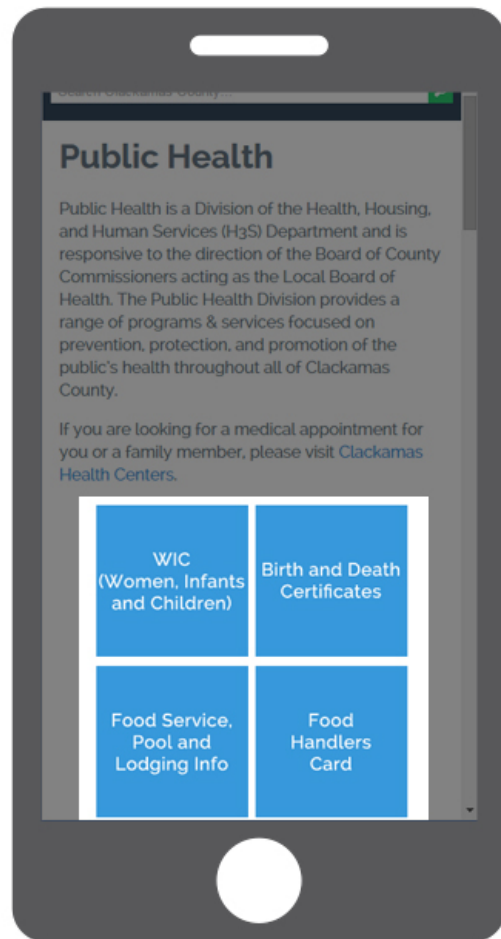
## Pages

PAGE URL	PAGEVIEWS	UNIQUE PAGEVIEWS	BOUNCE RATE	T1
publichealth/index	276	194	33%	00:
publichealth/wic.html	248	165	54%	00:
publichealth/certificates.html	166	122	54%	00:
publichealth/restaurantlicensi...	111	77	52%	00:
publichealth/foodhandler.html	57	53	58%	00:
publichealth/heal.html	110	38	24%	00:
publichealth/environmental.h...	48	32	37%	00:
publichealth/babylink.html	28	24	64%	00:
publichealth/immunizations.h...	31	23	25%	00:
publichealth/faqs.html	33	21	50%	00:
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publichealth/reportsanddata....	15	11	20%	00:
publichealth/communicable.h...	13	10	100%	00:
publichealth/recipients.html	9	9	0%	00:
publichealth/planreviewguida...	9	8	67%	00:
publichealth/drinkingwater.ht...	9	6	0%	00:
publichealth/howtoopenacount...	7	7	0%	00:

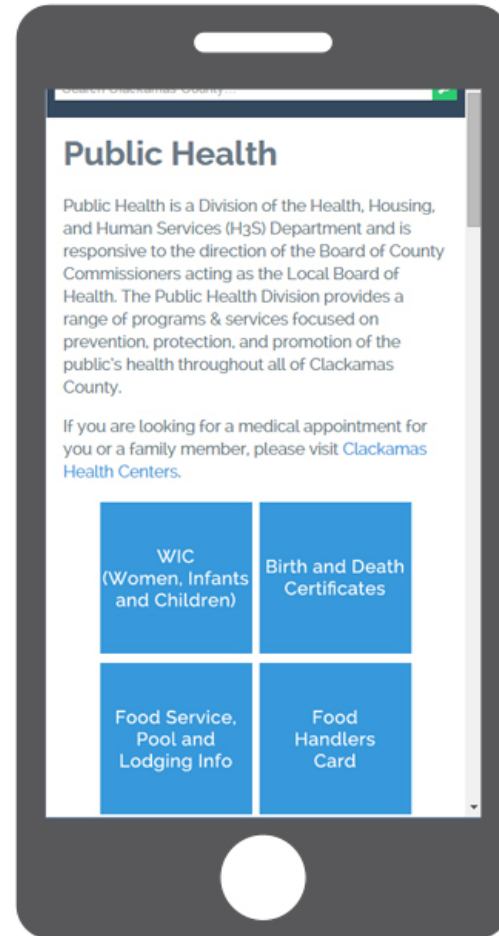
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publichealth/emergencyprepa...	13	11	0%	00:
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publichealth/reportsanddata....	15	11	20%	00:
publichealth/communicable.h...	13	10	100%	00:
publichealth/recipients.html	9	9	0%	00:
publichealth/planreviewguida...	9	8	67%	00:
publichealth/drinkingwater.ht...	9	6	0%	00:
publichealth/healthcarepro...	8	6	25%	00:



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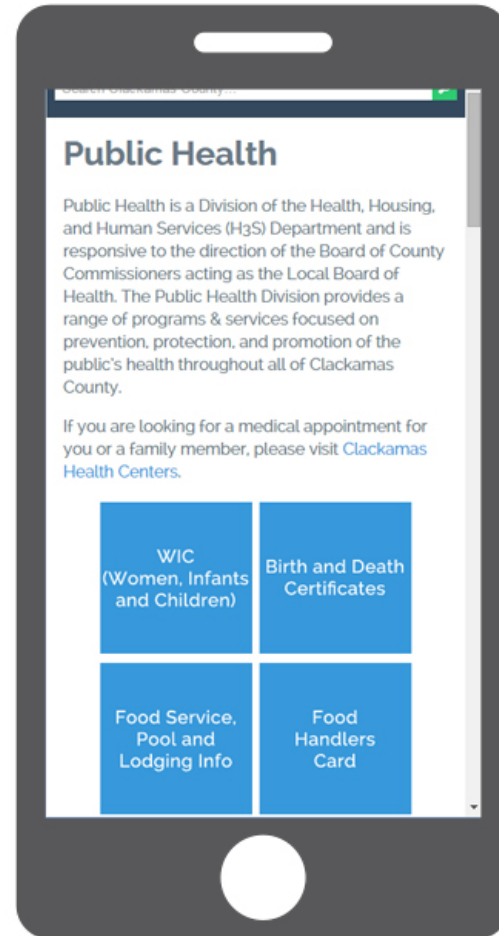
Did people come here  
to read this stuff?



Did people come here  
to read this stuff?



(We'll come back to this.)



How are your users feeling when they arrive at  
your web pages?





(Lost dog)

[clackamas.us/dogs/lostnfound.html](http://clackamas.us/dogs/lostnfound.html)



(Neighbor's dog is barking)

[clackamas.us/dogs/investigations.html](http://clackamas.us/dogs/investigations.html)





(Henry and Sam)

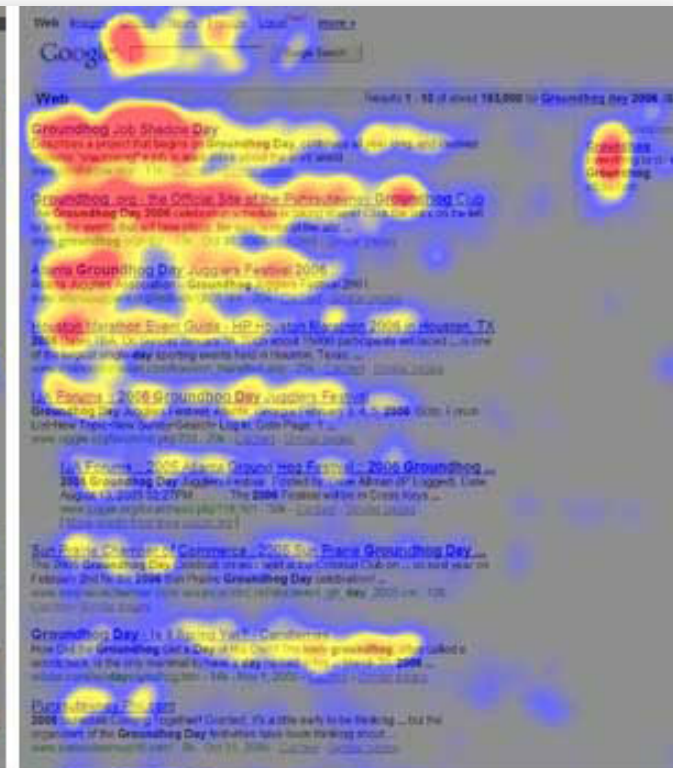
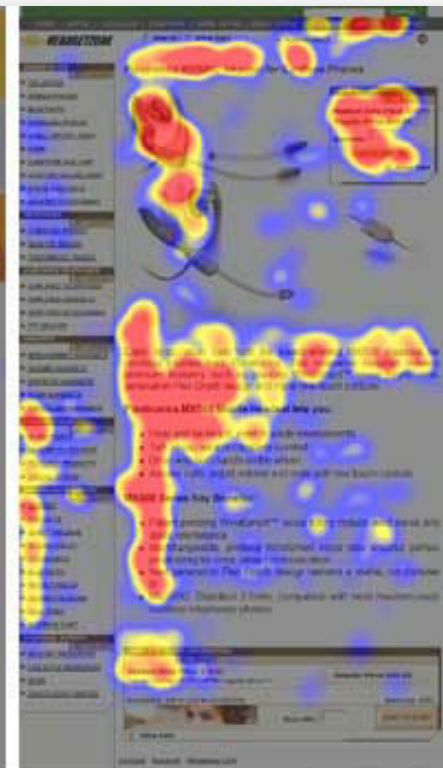


Our voice and tone should be appropriate to  
how our users feel.  
(We'll come back to this, too.)

# Web user behavior

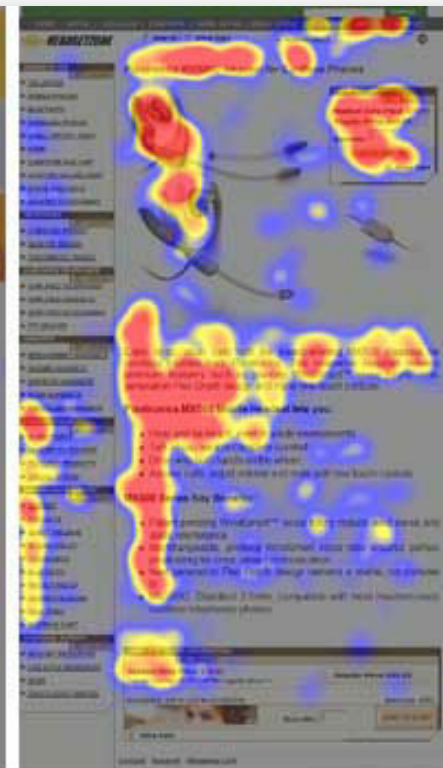
Web users scan content in F – shaped pattern.

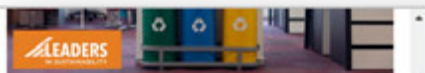




“Front-load”.  
Your most important content  
must be at the top.

Users quickly scan headings.  
“Chunk” your content to facilitate scanning.  
(use headings and bullets)





## Leaders In Sustainability: Resources for a Sustainable Workplace

Our sustainability advisors help businesses, non-profits, and local governments make operational improvements that bring efficiencies, foster innovation and reduce environmental impacts. We offer a menu of services to help support your business' efforts.

### I Want to...

Green  
My  
Business

Get  
Certified

Be  
Recognized

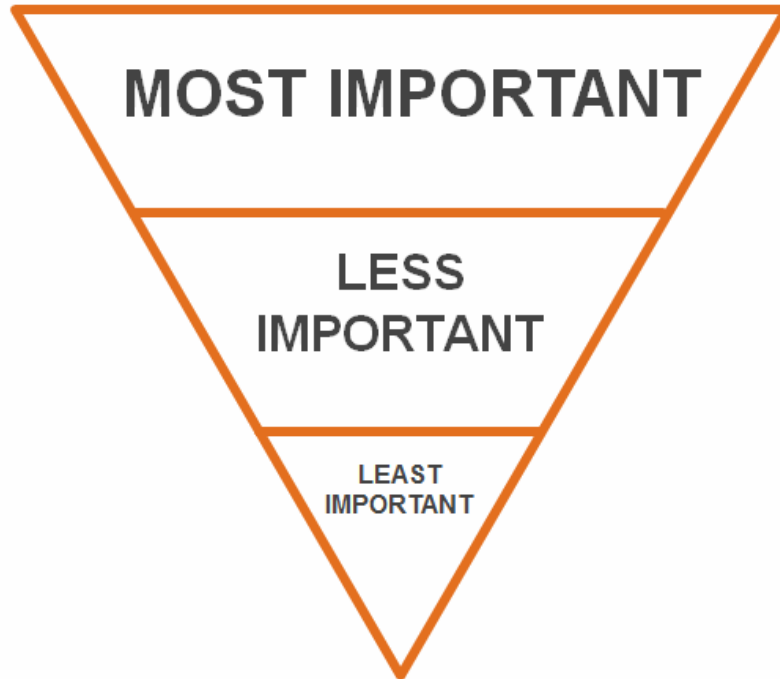
Recycle  
More

### Benefits to businesses

- Lower costs of utility bills
- Conserve resources
- Improve operational efficiency
- Provide a healthier workspace for employees

# The “Inverted Pyramid”

# The “Inverted Pyramid”



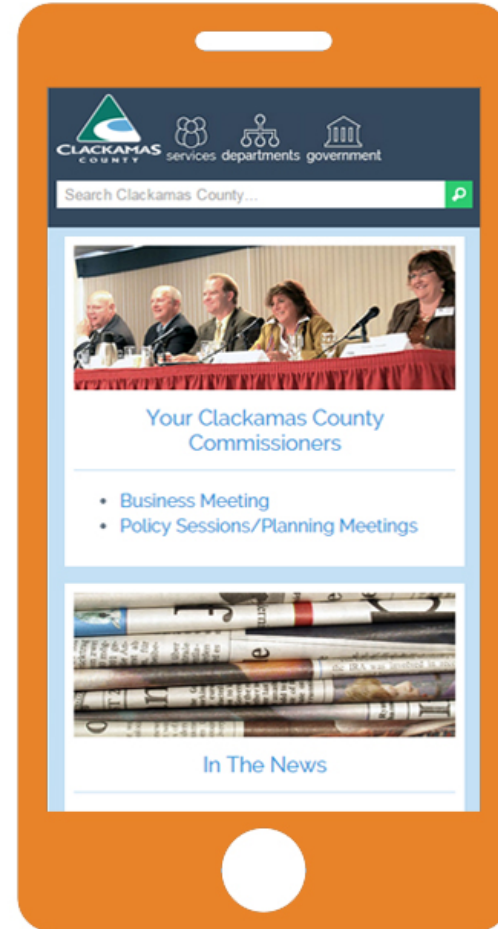
Don't build to your conclusion. Write the conclusion, then support it with details further down the page.



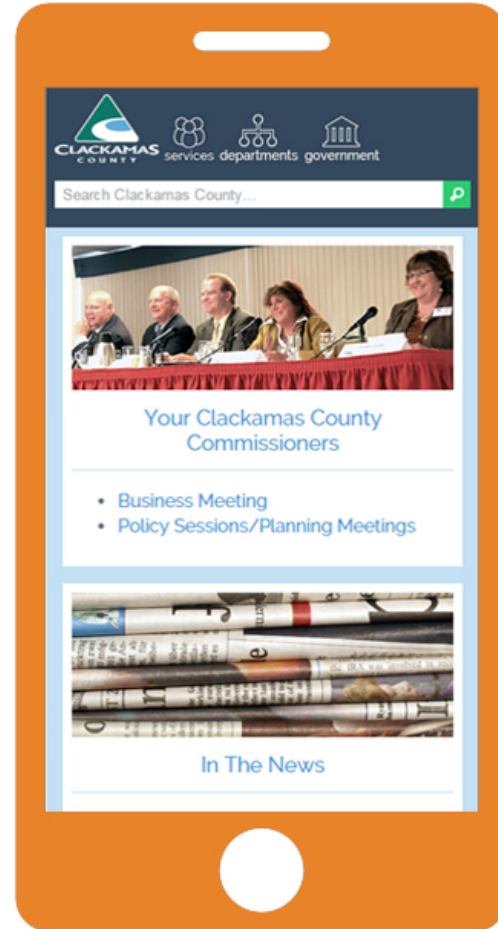
Research shows users only  
read 20-28% of a web page.

Another reason to front-load!

Mobile devices demand  
we get right to the point.



Mobile devices demand  
we get right to the point.  
Half of our visits are  
from mobile devices.



Mobile devices also make us rethink how we deliver content.



Mobile devices also make us  
rethink how we deliver content.  
(Our website is not a laser printer.)\*



\*Karen McGrane



“Brevity = respect”

Respect our users' time by getting to the point.

“But I’m busy, and I already have this fact sheet about this one thing. Can’t I just copy and paste to the website?”





Web reading is different. It demands a different writing approach than other media.

Three aspects that make web writing different:

- The unique way people read online
- Accessibility considerations
- The personal nature of the web



Improving the quality of all the written content on GOV.UK has made more of a difference than anything else, he says.

“It’s changed the perception of how government talks to its citizens.”





# Exercise!

## Content Evaluation

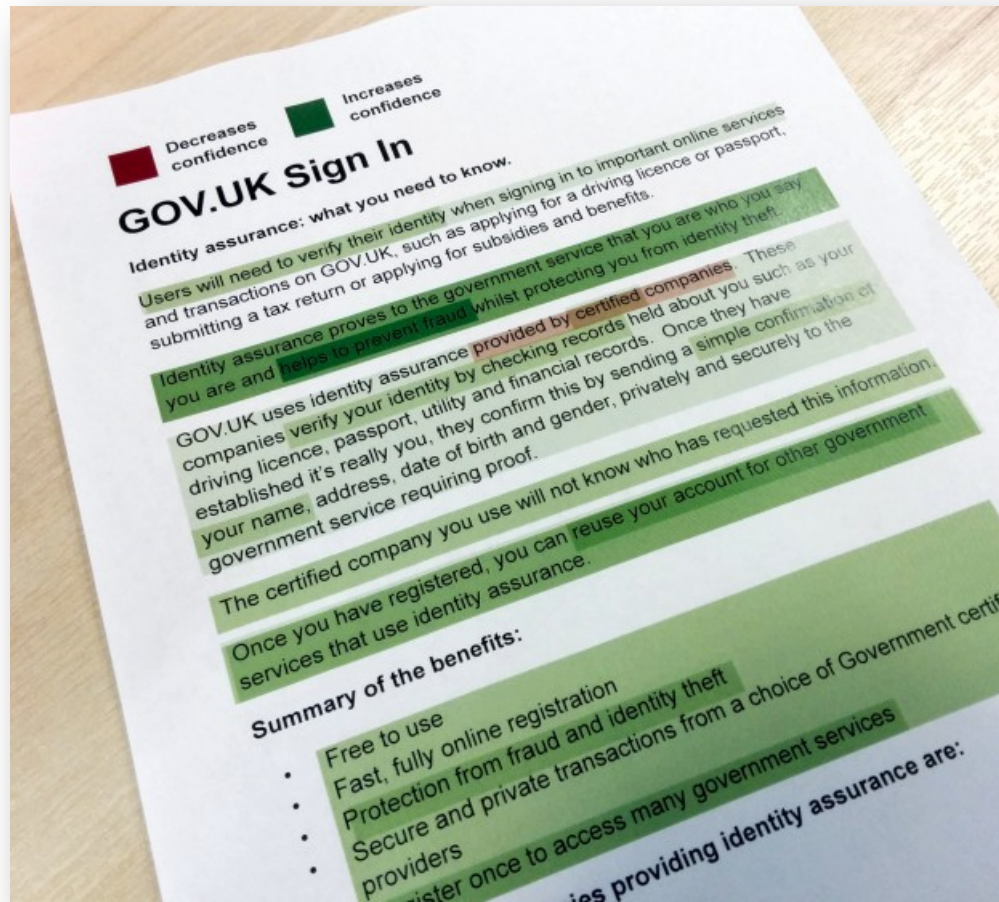
Brain Traffic

Underline **in green** the content that makes you feel:

- Confident
- Smart
- Ready to act

Underline **in red** content that makes you feel:

- Less confident
- Confused
- Hesitant



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Focus on conversations and  
key messages.

Web =



NOT =



*Letting Go of the Words, Ginny Redish*

Are we writing the same way we talk?

If you were running late to dinner at a friend's house, you probably wouldn't say, "Hello, I'm going to be late."

Instead, you'd be more specific and say something like, "In traffic, running about 10 minutes late."

## Our content

If you have an ownership interest in a lost dog you must reclaim the dog within the stray holding period (not including the day of impoundment, Sunday and federal holidays). If you fail to reclaim the dog you will lose your ownership interest.

## Our content

If you have an ownership interest in a lost dog you must reclaim the dog within **the stray holding period** (not including the day of impoundment, Sunday and federal holidays). If you fail to reclaim the dog you will lose your ownership interest.

Embrace “progressive disclosure.”

I prefer to think of “progressive disclosure” this way:

“You’ve earned my interest (and time) by presenting the basic information about this thing in a concise way.

Now I want to know more.”



Think “bite, snack, meal.” Offer the right amount of information depending on how “hungry” your user is.



We are currently working with County Parks to progressively disclose camping details.

## Our content

- 102 Campsites with water and electric hook-ups; 7 primitive camp sites
- Barton West open May 1 - September 30
- Barton East open May 1 - October 31. RVs only in sites #60-98. Special allowance for tents in Barton East loop for OCTOBER ONLY. Sites #101-107 are primitive: water spigots are nearby; no electric hook-ups. The group tent area has water and electric. Tents ONLY in primitive sites #101-107 and group tent area. Primitive/group tent area may use restroom/shower facilities in East Campground area (<5 minute walk via trail)
- \$26/night for partial hook-up sites (water/electric); \$21/night for primitive sites
- \$5 extra vehicle fee
- 2 ground tents or 1 ground tent and 1 RV allowed per campsite (Ground tents allowed in Barton East #60-98 in October only)
- Up to 8 people and 2 domestic pets allowed per site
- Sites that can accommodate a third tent at an additional \$5 per tent/per night, payable at the park: #5-33, 37, 38, 46, 50-52, 55, 59, A, B, D, E, F

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- 102 campsites with water and electric hookups (\$26/night)
  - 7 tent campsites (\$21/night)
  - Up to 8 people and 2 domestic pets allowed per site
  - 1 group tent – 25 people (\$60/night)
  - 1 bunkhouse – 4 people (\$30/night)
  - \$5/extra vehicle
- 
- Barton West open May 1 - September 30
  - Barton East open May 1 - October 31

Barton Park camping details



Structure content in “steps” to provide digestible segments.

## Leaders In Sustainability: Green My Business

Sustainability advisors offer a one stop shop for all the resources the County and its partners have to offer businesses. We can help your company profit from reducing solid waste, conserving energy and water, making environmentally friendly purchases and safely disposing of toxic materials.



Call to schedule an onsite  
Sustainability Consultation  
with an advisor today!

(503) 742-4458

1

### Get Started

Is your business already doing a great job recycling? Has your Green Team lost momentum? Think you are doing all that you can, but want an outside perspective? Check out our [resources](#) or schedule a sustainability consultation.

2

### Sustainability Consultation

Our expert advisors evaluate how materials flow through your business to uncover hidden cost savings and efficiencies. You'll receive recommendations, tools and ongoing support to help your organization be more resource-efficient. We can facilitate a strategy session to prioritize your organizations goals and challenges.

3

### Engage Staff

We help engage your coworkers with sustainability or recycling 101 trainings, green team tools and ideas for competitions and campaigns. Let's get started!



Share your story

Next Step: [Get Certified](#)

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## Leaders In Sustainability: Get Certified

Join Clackamas County Leaders in Sustainability and get access to a variety of services and tools to support your triple bottom line: economy, environment and community. This county wide recognition is earned through dedication and commitment. Leaders in Sustainability take concrete steps to minimize waste, conserve energy and water, invest in employees and support the community.

Leaders in Sustainability has three levels of certification to recognize your business's positive impact on our environment and our community. Certification will help you share your achievements with staff and customers and capitalize on your success.



### Steps to Certification

1

#### Download and review the application and guide

Identify practices you currently follow and that you want to explore. Use [the guide](#) to familiarize yourself with potential new practices.



2

#### Schedule a site visit

Call (503) 742-4458 or email [smartin@clackamas.us](mailto:smartin@clackamas.us). A consultation visit typically takes about an hour to complete. An advisor can assess your current waste, water and energy use and purchasing practices. You'll receive recommendations, tools and ongoing support to help your organization be more resource efficient and set priorities.

Use plain language.

Plain language is both a writing practice and a set of guidelines.  
[plainlanguage.gov](http://plainlanguage.gov)

Oh, and federal law.



*Plain Writing Act of 2010*  
<http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-111publ274/pdf/PLAW-111publ274.pdf>

The *Federal Plain Language Guidelines* has a section devoted to the web.

“

When writing web content, use:

- Logical organization
- Informative headings
- Active voice
- Use pronouns
- Common words
- Use lists and tables

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When writing web content, avoid:

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- Hidden verbs
- Passive voice
- Long sentences or paragraphs
- Abbreviations
- Unnecessary words
- Information the user doesn't want

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Avoid hidden verbs.

# Avoid hidden verbs.

A hidden verb is a verb converted into a noun. It often needs an extra verb to make sense. So we write: Please draft an application for a personal loan... rather than Please apply for a personal loan....

# Avoid hidden verbs.

## Hidden Verb:

To trace the missing payment, we need to carry out a review of the Agency's accounts so we can gain an understanding of the reason the error occurred.

# Avoid hidden verbs.

## Hidden Verb:

To trace the missing payment, we need to **carry out a** review **of** the Agency's accounts so we **can gain an** understanding **of** the reason the error occurred.

## Uncovered:

To trace the missing payment, we need to review the Agency's accounts so we understand the reason the error occurred.

# Avoid hidden verbs.

## Hidden Verb:

The production of accurate statistics is important for the committee in the assessment of our homelessness policy.

# Avoid hidden verbs.

## Hidden Verb:

The production of accurate statistics is important for the committee in the assessment of our homelessness policy.

## Uncovered:

Producing accurate statistics is important to the committee in assessing our policy on homelessness.



Use active voice.

# Use active voice.

Passive: The lake was polluted by the company.

# Use active voice.

~~Passive: The lake was polluted by the company.~~

Active: The company polluted the lake.

# Use active voice.

~~Passive: The lake was polluted by the company.~~

Active: The company polluted the lake.

Passive: New regulations were proposed.

# Use active voice.

~~Passive: The lake was polluted by the company.~~

Active: The company polluted the lake.

~~Passive: New regulations were proposed.~~

Active: We proposed new regulations.

Why is this important?

An active voice is not only direct and concise.  
It inspires trust.

# Use active voice.

Passive: The following information must be included in the application for it to be considered complete.



# Use active voice.

~~Passive: The following information must be included in the application for it to be considered complete.~~

Active: You must include the following information in your application.

# Use active voice.

~~Passive: The following information must be included in the application for it to be considered complete.~~

Active: You must include the following information in your application.

Passive: Regulations have been proposed by the Department of Veterans Affairs.

# Use active voice.

~~Passive: The following information must be included in the application for it to be considered complete.~~

Active: You must include the following information in your application.

~~Passive: Regulations have been proposed by the Department of Veterans Affairs.~~

Active: We have proposed new regulations.

# Use active voice.

Passive: The permit must be approved by the agency's State office.

# Use active voice.

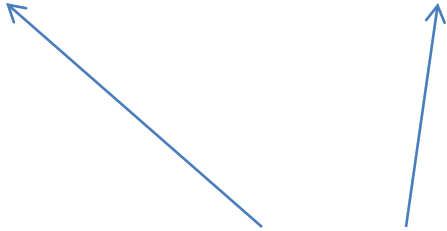
~~Passive: The permit must be approved by the agency's State office.~~

Active: Our State office must approve your permit.

# Use active voice.

~~Passive: The permit must be approved by the agency's State office.~~

Active: Our State office must approve your permit.

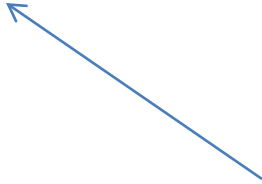


The active voice is about action and accountability. It is clear, inspires trust and personalizes our services.

# Use active voice.

~~Passive: Regulations have been proposed by the Department of Veterans Affairs.~~

Active: We have proposed new regulations.



We're using pronouns to personalize our services and make it clear *we have done* something.

Does this inspire trust?



“The applicant’s permit will be processed by the department within 10 days.”

“We will process your application  
within 10 days.”

How is that different?

“

When writing web content, use:

- Logical organization
- Informative headings
- ~~Active voice~~
- ~~Use pronouns~~
- Common words
- Use lists and tables

# Common words

## INSTEAD OF

capability  
caveat  
close proximity  
combat environment  
combined  
**commence**  
comply with  
component  
comprise  
concerning  
consequently  
consolidate  
constitutes  
contains  
convene  
currently  
deem  
delete  
demonstrate  
depart  
designate  
desire  
determine  
disclose  
discontinue  
disseminate  
due to the fact that  
during the period

[Back to Top](#)

## TRY

ability  
warning  
near  
combat  
joint  
**begin, start**  
follow  
part  
form, include, make up  
about, on  
so  
combine, join, merge  
is, forms, makes up  
has  
meet  
(omit), now  
believe, consider, think  
cut, drop  
prove, show  
leave  
appoint, choose, name  
want, wish  
decide, figure, find  
show  
drop, stop  
give, issue, pass, send  
due to, since  
during



[www.plainlanguage.gov](http://www.plainlanguage.gov)

“

When writing web content, avoid:

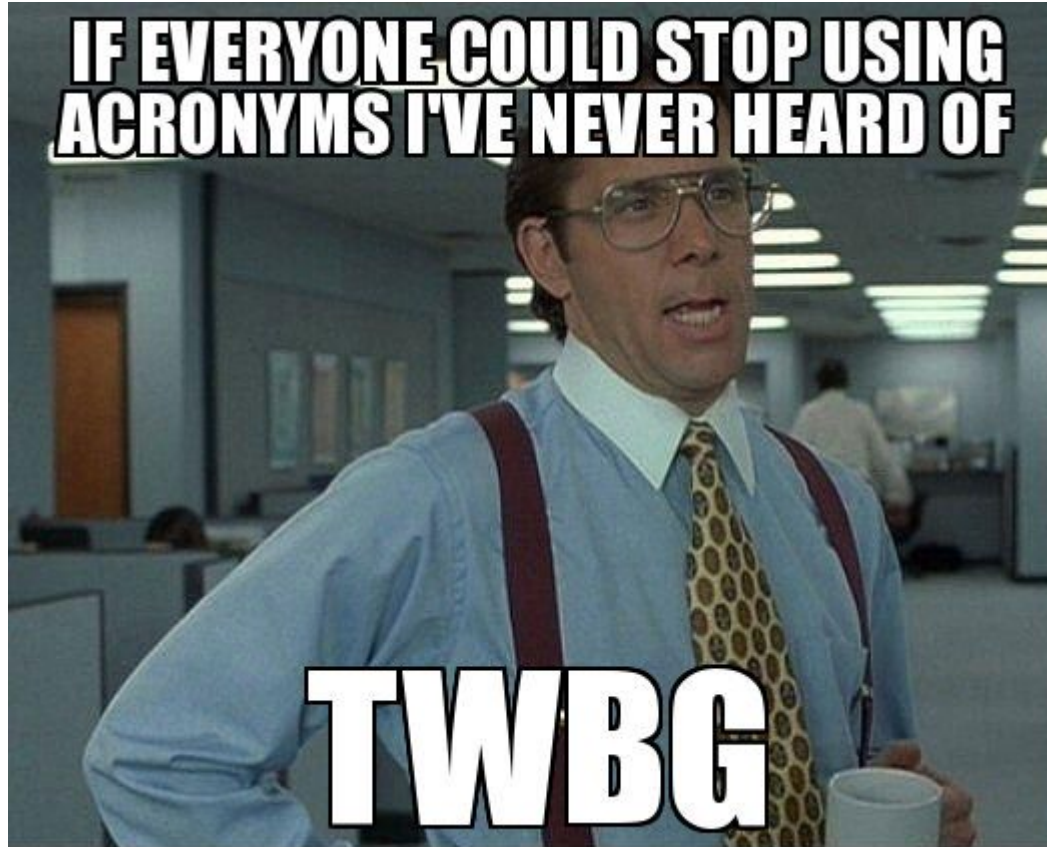
- ~~Jargon and legalese~~
- ~~Hidden verbs~~
- ~~Passive voice~~
- Long sentences or paragraphs
- **Abbreviations**
- Unnecessary words
- Information the user doesn't want



**IF EVERYONE COULD STOP USING  
ACRONYMS I'VE NEVER HEARD OF**

**TWBG**

**IF EVERYONE COULD STOP USING  
ACRONYMS I'VE NEVER HEARD OF**



**TWBG**

We Know Memes

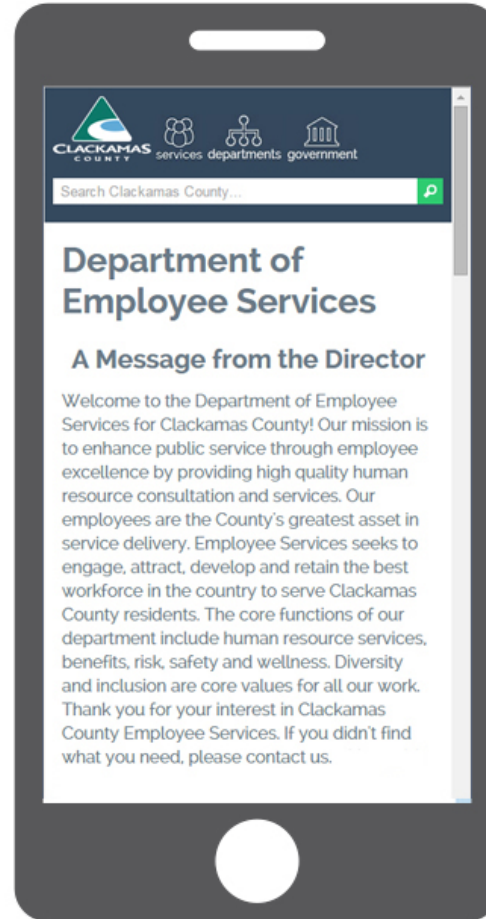
(Technically, this isn't an acronym.)

Use abbreviations sparingly, and always spell out first mention (on every page).

Welcome messages

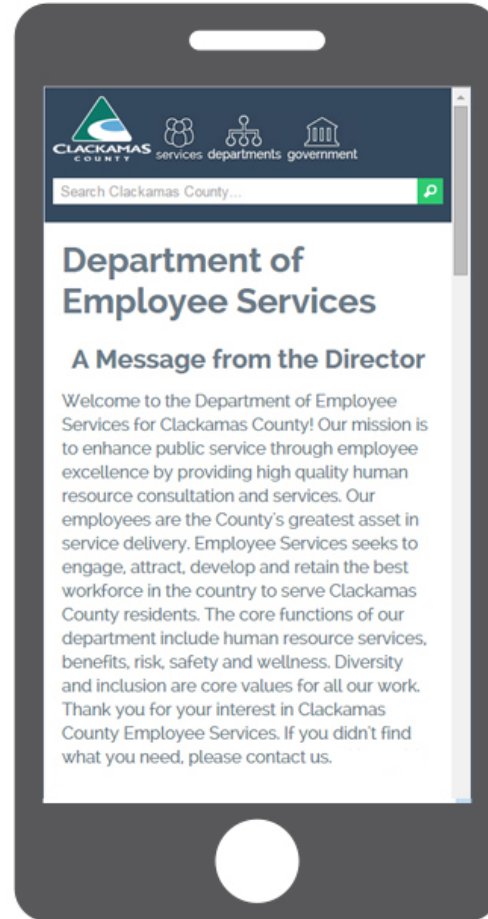
Many government websites and letters contain meaningless formal language such as flowery welcome messages and “we hope you get a lot out of our program” messages. Using this type of language wastes space and your users’ time.

Are users coming  
here to read this  
stuff?



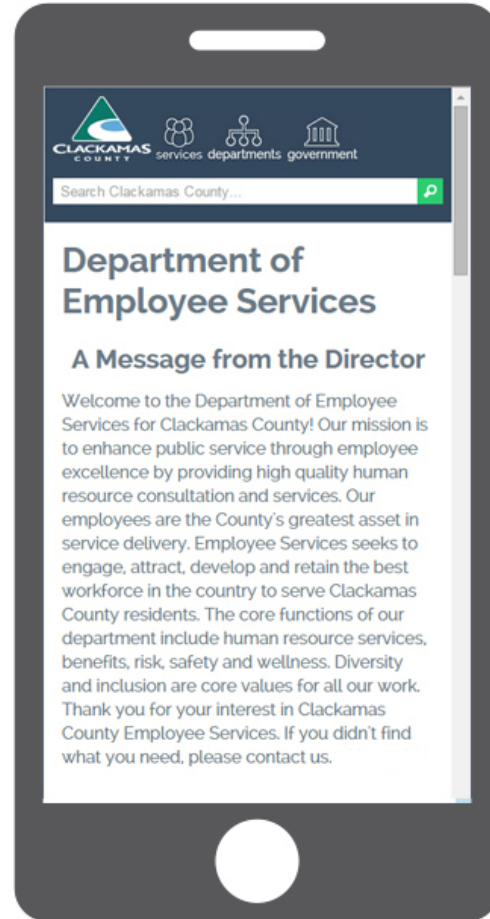
# SPOILER ALERT!

Are users coming  
here to read this  
stuff?



# No. No, they are not.

Are users coming here to read this stuff?





# Much better.

Most users want  
to look at job  
openings.



Concise  
description;  
bulleted list



Plain language helps both low-literacy and high-literacy site visitors.



[http://iat.ubalt.edu/summers/papers/Summers\\_ASIST2005.pdf](http://iat.ubalt.edu/summers/papers/Summers_ASIST2005.pdf)

Ginny Redish. *Letting Go of the Words.*



# Exercise!

## Using Hemingway Editor

[www.hemingwayapp.com](http://www.hemingwayapp.com)

**Hemingway**  
Editor

Our content

# Exercise!

Using Hemingway Editor

[www.hemingwayapp.com](http://www.hemingwayapp.com)

**Hemingway**  
Editor

## Design Review

The Design Review process ensures that new and significantly remodeled commercial and multifamily developments meet the needs of the entire community. Design Review considers issues that affect safety, function, overall appearance and livability. These issues include zoning, existing site conditions, off-site impacts, setbacks, access, parking, grading, drainage, signs, landscaping and architectural design. Adequate circulation for pedestrians, bicycles, cars and service vehicles also must be considered.

<http://www.clackamas.us/planning/designreview.html>



# Voice and tone

Voice and tone  
What's the difference?

Voice: consistent across entire website



Voice: consistent across entire website

Professional

Competent

Helpful

Sincere

Authoritative

Voice: consistent across entire website

**Professional** but not **impersonal**

**Competent** but not **condescending**

**Helpful** but not **overbearing**

**Sincere** but not **sappy**

**Authoritative** but not **egotistical**

Tone: situational; dependent on users' mood



Tone: situational; dependent on users' mood

- Warm
- Conversational
- Welcoming
- Empathetic
- Decisive

“Speak onto the page.”



*Nicely Said: Writing for the Web  
with Style and Purpose* Nicole  
Fenton and Kate Kiefer Lee

Don't be afraid to talk to yourself. Find the proper tone by reading aloud.

Don't sound like a robot. You are a human writer, writing for human users.



Don't sound like a robot. You are a human  
writer, writing for human users.  
(except Gollum)

Unless you're an attorney, do not refer to  
people as abbreviations!  
(Even then, don't publish it on the website.)

Do not refer to people as abbreviations!

## Our content

1. The First-time Home Buyer (FTHB) completes an approved homebuyer training class. A list of class sites is posted on the State of Oregon, Department of Housing and Community Services (OHCS) website at [www.oregonbond.us](http://www.oregonbond.us)
2. FTHB chooses a lender from the state's list of approved lenders and gets pre-qualified. A list of approved lenders is on the OHCS website.
3. Clackamas County's Community Development Division (CDD) provides a complete packet of forms to interested lenders upon request. The CDD manages the North Clackamas Revitalization Area Homebuyer Assistance program through an agreement with the Clackamas County Development Agency.



## Our content

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+ 6 more references



# Check your tone with these questions:

- Is it useful?
- Is it true?
- Is it nice?

# Check your tone with these questions:

- Is it useful?
  - Is it true?
  - Is it nice?
- Does it acknowledge the user's mood?



DO NOT USE ALL CAPS.

DO NOT USE ALL CAPS.  
Difficult to read; rude

Find opportunities to explain the purpose of a service.

For example, how does the restaurant plan review process benefit our local communities?

## Our content

The Clackamas County Environmental Health Program conducts a plan review for all new construction, remodeling, or changes in the type of food service (e.g. a bar adding cooked foods to their menu).

The process ensures that both construction and operation comply with the applicable health codes.

## Our content

The Clackamas County Environmental Health Program conducts a plan review for all new construction, remodeling, or changes in the type of food service (e.g. a bar adding cooked foods to their menu).

The process ensures that both construction and operation comply with the applicable health codes, [keeping our communities safe and healthy.](#)



MailChimp's voice and tone guide is awesome.

[voiceandtone.com](https://voiceandtone.com)







# Exercise!

## Mood mapping

# Exercise!

## Mood mapping

[web3.clackamas.us/dogs/found.jsp](http://web3.clackamas.us/dogs/found.jsp)

[www.clackamas.us/socialservices/energy.html](http://www.clackamas.us/socialservices/energy.html)

[www.clackamas.us/planning/floodinsurance.html](http://www.clackamas.us/planning/floodinsurance.html)

# Accessibility

We want everyone to benefit from the information we provide on the website.

Appropriately, we are required by law to make our web content accessible to everyone.

# Accessibility standards benefit all users:

- improve searchability
- content structure
- content purpose



How would you describe the photo to  
someone who can't see it?



How would you describe the photo to  
someone over the phone?

Alternative text (alt text) is used by screen readers to communicate what's in an image.

Alternative text (alt text) is used by screen readers to communicate what's in an image.

Without it, images are inaccessible to people who are blind or visually impaired.

Use descriptive links.

Use descriptive links.  
Avoid [click here](#) and [read more](#) links.

People using screen readers can listen to a list of just the links on a page.

They could end up hearing this...

"Link." "Click here."  
"Link." "Click here."  
"Link." "Click here."  
"Link." "Click here."  
"Link." "Click here."  
"Link." "Click here."  
"Link." "Click here."  
"Link." "Click here."  
"Link." "Click here."  
"Link." "Click here."



Use descriptive links instead.

[Click here](#) for a review of this week's board activity.

~~[Click here](#) for a review of this week's board activity.~~

View a [complete board recap](#) from this week.

Our new video shows how Small Grants are making a big difference. [Click here](#) to watch.



~~Our new video shows how Small Grants are making a big difference. [Click here](#) to watch.~~

Small Grants are making a big difference. Watch the [Small Grants video](#) to see how.

Do not list out URL addresses.

More information at:

<http://www.clackamas.us/publichealth/dentalhealth.html>



More information at:

<http://www.clackamas.us/publichealth/dentalhealth.html>

The screen reader will read out the URL.



“Link.” “h-t-t-p-colon-slash-slash-w-w-w-dot-clackamas-dot-us-slash-publichealth-slash-dentalhealth-dot-html”

More information at:

<http://www.clackamas.us/publichealth/dentalhealth.html>

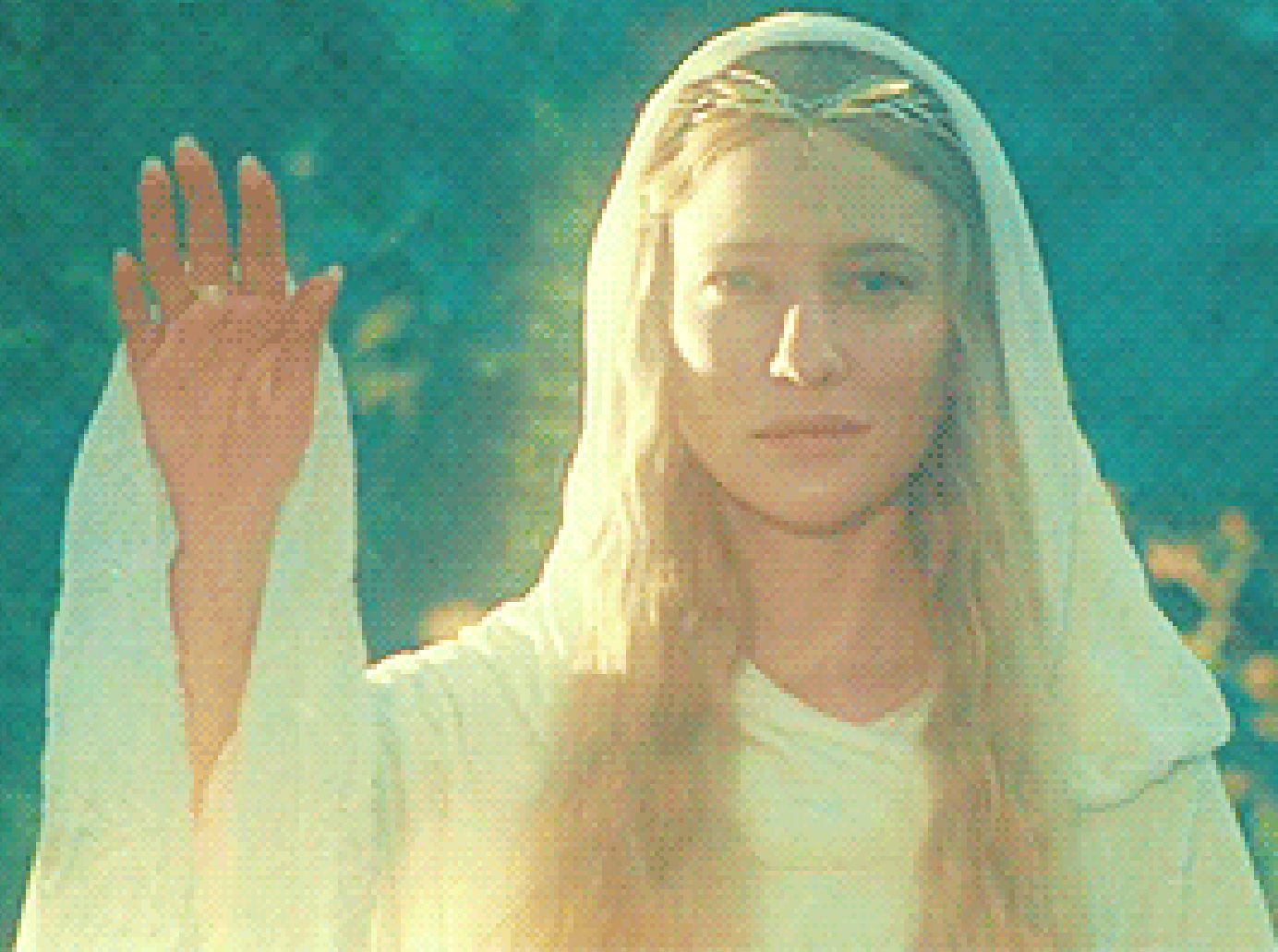
More low cost dental care options.



A word on format.

PDFs are not structured to facilitate accessibility.

Scanned documents are not accessible.



# Exercise!

Screen reader demo  
ChromeVox