

THE INTERNET WRITER'S HANDBOOK

Second Edition

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Part 1:
Web Writing and Design
Principles

► Comparing Online and Print Documents

To understand the guidelines for writing and designing Web pages, you should consider the differences between print and Web documents.

Online Format: Screens are landscape orientation and about one-third of a normal page size. Because monitors vary in size and in the number of colors they display, you cannot be sure how your colors and graphics will display. Monitors also shine light in readers' eyes, unlike print documents that use reflected light. Thus it is more tiring to read online text. Less words, simpler sentences, more white space, and less punctuation are therefore appropriate.

Web pages are
-Horizontal
-Scroll
-Linked
-Grainy
-Skimmed

Online Text: Text and graphics are grainy—about 50 to 100 dots per inch. Thus it is difficult to read long pages of text online. In fact, reading speed decreases by about 80%. Fonts appear different sizes in different resolutions. Web design is not WYSIWYG (What You See Is What You Get). A Web page will look different on every monitor and browser. Readers can change text size defaults in their browsers as well.

Web Features: Web documents do have many advantages over print documents: they allow you to use links, color, animation, interactivity and multimedia. Unfortunately, these elements can cause Web pages to load slowly and cause "information overload" if not used with discretion. The Web also allows you to distribute documents to a wide audience and update information frequently.

Online Readers: Web readers read differently—they scan and are usually in a hurry. So information must be brief, clear, and skimmable. Web readers also prefer bite-sized chunks of information. In addition, they must scroll or click to navigate. They cannot carry the documents with them or annotate them without printing them out. Print readers start at the upper left; on Web pages, readers see the entire screen as a whole. Thus positioning of important information is crucial.

All these differences affect decisions about how you arrange, write, and format Web documents.

► Understanding the Writing Process

Writing a Web page requires several stages. These may include any of the following tasks, and many steps may occur simultaneously or be repeated:

- Brainstorm topics
- Determine content and research material
- Consider copyright issues
- Determine the objectives and purpose
- Analyze the audience
- Organize material
- Plan the structure and navigation

- Create a concept document, flowchart, and/or storyboard to aid planning
- Design the page layout
- Select HTML software
- Plan file management
- Establish guidelines
- Write
- Create the pages
- Add graphics
- Edit
- Test and validate
- Conduct usability testing

These topics are described in more detail in the handbook section. The next sections focus on some of the most critical topics involved in writing and formatting Web documents.

RELATED HANDBOOK TOPICS

GUIDELINES

Cascading Style Sheets
Editorial Submission Guidelines
Privacy Policy
Style Guide
Style Sheets (Editorial)

FILE FORMATS & MANAGEMENT

Adobe Acrobat
Animation
Download Menu
File Management
Handhelds: Writing For...
HTML Editing Software
Multimedia
Printing
User Options

ISSUES

Accessibility
Copyright Issues
Deep Linking
Netiquette
Platform-Independent Terminology
Privacy/Personal Information

► Writing For Your Audience

Identifying Your Audience: One of the most important steps in writing a Web page is identifying your readers and the information they want. The target audience affects your entire site.

Accommodating Reader Levels: Although you should write for a target audience, you may still have readers who range from experts to novices. Experts include experienced Internet users and subject-matter experts. If you believe that many experts will be interested in your Web pages, try to accommodate their needs and interests. New users are unfamiliar with Web terminology, navigating, and configuring their browsers. They may also be unfamiliar with the subject. If you believe that many new users will be reading your Web pages, consider adapting your site for novices. One simple way to accommodate these varied types of readers is through layering information through links.

Using an Appropriate Style: Several writing techniques are used to explain technical terms, abbreviations, and acronyms that will be new to the user. Definitions help explain concepts and principles and accommodate novices. Glossary links allow readers to access definitions from any page. Examples and case studies can help explain abstract conceptual information or improve productivity. Analogies explain conceptual information or objects, help readers understand technical information, and elaborate on definitions. Site guides/help are also useful for novice users.

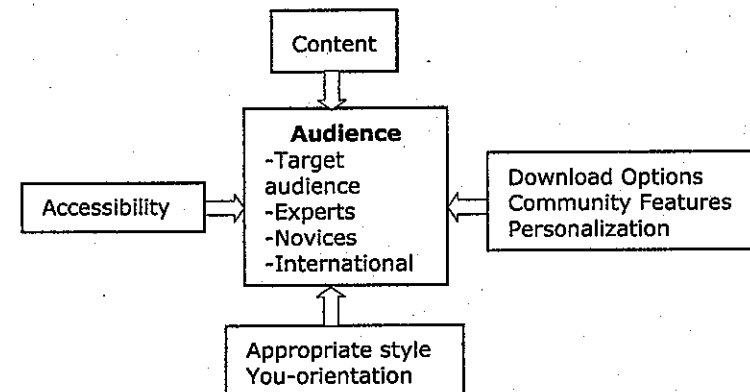
Using an Informal Style: Many Web pages tend to be more personal, direct, and conversational than most printed documents. Usability studies show that most Web readers prefer informal, conversational, down-to-earth writing and Web sites with personality rather than cold, impersonal sites. In addition, difficult writing slows readers down. Informal writing is achieved by a conversational sentence style and word choice (such as contractions). You should also avoid jargon and buzzwords and define acronyms. "You" orientation is another method of using informal writing and a personal tone. It emphasizes reader benefits and conveys a personal tone that is positive and friendly.

Providing Personalization and Community Features and Other Options: Readers also like to tailor the look and feel of the site to their own tastes. For example, they may select how they want to view your Web page, or the type of information to download. Allowing users to make choices makes your Web page reader-centered and independent of browser or hardware. Community features are elements you provide in your Web site for readers to interact. Providing community features allow readers to communicate with you and with each other, and to exchange information.

Making Your Site Accessible: Anyone should be able obtain information on your site regardless of platform, browser, devices, and disabilities. In designing an accessible site, you accommodate different audience levels, slow connections, users with text-only browsers, users in a hurry, users who want to print your page, and users with other handheld and other portable devices.

A number of accessibility guidelines are described in the handbook. The Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) develops guidelines for accessibility of Web sites, browsers, and authoring tools. These guidelines benefit people both with and without disabilities and make it easier to use the Web. One of the most important guidelines is providing textual alternatives (ALT tags) for graphical elements on your page.

Through effective writing style and word choice, you also consider international readers. Even though you may have targeted a specific audience for your Web page, you may have many secondary readers. Because the Web is a global medium, your audience may reach readers around the world.



RELATED HANDBOOK TOPICS

WRITING FOR YOUR AUDIENCE

Accessibility
Acronyms
Analogies
Audience Analysis
Audience: Writing for Experts and Novices
Buzzwords
Children: Writing Web Pages for Kids
Definitions
Examples
Glossary
International Audience
Jargon
Readability
Site Guide/Help
"You" Orientation

INFORMAL WRITING STYLE

Active Voice
Contractions
Informal Writing
Personal Tone/Personalization
Tone
"You" Orientation

READER FEATURES

Community Features
Feedback
Interactivity
User Options/Personalization
Weblogs

ACCESSIBILITY

Accessibility
Alternative (ALT) Text
Long Descriptions
Platform-Independent Terminology
User Options/Personalization
Validation

► Providing Content

After you determine who your target audience is, determine the types of topics that are important to them. This is a key step in planning a Web site. Successful sites provide high-quality content. "Useless" Web sites have no purpose and are a waste of readers' time. Provide content that is relevant, useful, interesting, valuable, fresh, and original. Also strike a balance between providing too little and too much information. Provide links to FAQs, archives, background material, relevant sites, interactivity, and other support information.

Content

Archives
Background
FAQs
Interaction
Resources
Support

However, don't take your existing content and simply put it online. Instead, rework it using the principles in this handbook, such as chunking, layering information, and making text skimmable. Also make sure your content is well-organized and well-written.

Finally, provide readers with new content (updated information) each time they visit (information, news, job postings, etc.). A well-maintained Web site encourages repeat visits and makes your site "sticky"—it attracts readers, keeps them on your site, and makes them return.

RELATED HANDBOOK TOPICS

Content
Stickiness
Updated Information

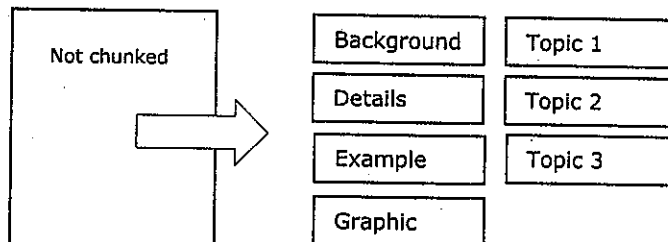
► Chunking Information

After you determine your content, you begin to plan how to divide and organize it. Information "chunking" involves breaking information into small units. A chunk usually consists of one topic, idea or concept.

By chunking information into small units, you make large topics more manageable.

Furthermore, chunking makes information easier to revise and update.

Readers can also decide which topics they need. Presenting small chunks of information that link to more detailed or complex information makes optimal use of hypertext.



RELATED HANDBOOK TOPICS

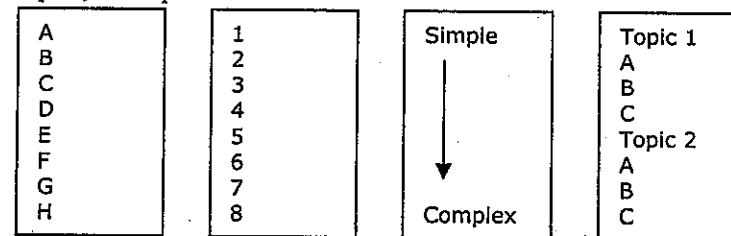
Chunking

► Organizing Information

Once information is chunked, it must be organized into a structure appropriate for the site's goals and audience. Organizing information in a logical order helps users form a mental model of the structure and find information more quickly. Types of structure include linear/sequential, linear with alternative paths, hierarchical, web/network, and grid. On paper, the sequential arrangement of topics is often important. In online documents, however, content is more important than the topic order because readers can jump around.

You choose the appropriate organization for the type of document or information, such as a company or organization page; reference or educational information, FAQ, home page, business or service page; online journal, book, newsletter, or magazine; a list page; product

or service information, sales and persuasive information, or a school Web site. You organize information at all levels, such as the content of the entire Web site, the order of topics in your menu or table of contents, the order of paragraphs within topics, and the order of points in a bulleted list. Types of organization include alphabetical, cause/effect, chronological, general to specific, hierarchical, most to least important, sequential, simple to complex, and topical.



RELATED HANDBOOK TOPICS

ORGANIZATION

Next Links
Organization
Site Map
Structure
Structure: Sequential
Visual Cues

TYPES OF PAGES

Book: Online
Catalog Page
Company Page
Course Offering
Educational Information
FAQ
Home Page
Informational Page: Business or Service
Journal (Electronic)
List Page
Magazine or E-Zine
Newsletter
Organization Page
Personal Page
Press Release
Product or Service Information
Reference Information
Resume
Sales & Persuasive Sites
School Web Site

SALES

Action Steps
Attention
Blurbs
Credibility
Promotional Language
Sales & Persuasive Sites
Stickiness

JOURNALISM

Blurbs
Headlines
Magazine or E-Zine
Newsletter
Publication Information

TECHNICAL WRITING

FAQ
Instructions
Procedures
Process/How Things Work
Quick Reference
Support: Technical
Training/Tutorial
Troubleshooting
User Guide
White Paper

RELATED HANDBOOK TOPICS (CONTINUED)**OTHER TYPES OF ONLINE WRITING**

E-Mail

E-Mail List Information

E-Mail Query

Usenet/News group Posting

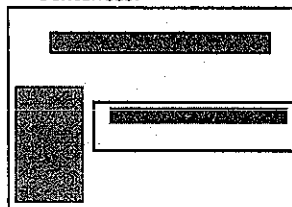
► Emphasizing Important Information

Because readers are busy and skim, you should organize information so that the important information is easy to find. You can emphasize important information by using a variety of textual, organizational, and visual techniques.

Using Summaries: A summary or abstract condenses the main points of an article, document, or "bottom line" information. Because users skim sites, they read summaries to get the key information or determine what information they want to go to. "Blurbs" or annotations accompany headlines and may appear in a table of contents, "related topics," list of links, or e-newsletters. The description saves time by helping readers decide if they want to visit the page or know what to expect.

Using Introductions: The home page is the first page of a Web site—the page people start with and return to when navigating. It is the most important page on your site because it serves as an introduction that indicates the site's content, purpose, and scope. It also sets the tone and creates a first impression. The main menu/table of contents allows readers to find information.

Emphasize important information visually. Put important information first. Use summaries, introductions, and topic sentences.



Every Web page should tell readers who created the site, the sponsor, purpose, type of information, how often content is navigated, how to navigate, and how to contact the owners/authors.

Write a strong introduction to your Web site (introduction to site) and an introduction at the top of each Web page. Each introduction should explain what the page is about and summarize the contents. The introductory sentence should concisely state the purpose of the page and contain keywords. Because Web readers scan pages, the introduction can help them decide whether to continue reading.

Site Introduction

Who wrote the site?
What is the site about?
Where can I go?
When was it written?
Why is the site worth reading?
How will this site benefit me?

Using the Inverted Pyramid: The "inverted pyramid" method places the most important information first. It provides a bottom-line summary or conceptual overview. Secondary information is available later on the page or through a hyperlink. Information is presented in the following order:

- Main point: who, what, where, when, why, and how
- Brief overview/preview of topics (advance organizer)
- Brief statement of the context
- Background information (or a link to background and conceptual information) needed to understand the topic.
- Link to details and examples

Summary
 Key points
 ↓
 Details

The following table illustrates the use of a hierarchical organization and inverted pyramid. It begins with "bottom line" or general principle and then gives details.

General principle or summary goes here.	
Heading	Details
Heading	Details
Heading	Details

Using Topic Sentences: Topic sentences are crucial in Web paragraphs because most readers skim Web pages. A topic sentence lets busy readers decide whether to read the paragraph. It also provides the context for the information, explains why the information is important, and previews the organization and contents.

Positioning Key Information: The important information is the message or main point of your Web page or site—what you want people to remember. It should appear early in your Web page, within the focal point, and above the "scroll line." If your home page contains numerous links, make it clear where to begin.

RELATED HANDBOOK TOPICS**IMPORTANT INFORMATION**

Focal Point
 Important Information
 Introductions
 Inverted Pyramid
 Page Length
 Scannability
 Scrolling
 Summary/Abstract
 Topic Sentence

SUMMARIZING INFORMATION

Blurb
 Annotation
 Summary

SITE INTRODUCTION

Home Page
 Introduction: Site
 Purpose
 Scope