Tips for Writing for the Web

Shape your text for online reading
Text that works best on the Web is text that gets to the point fast and that makes it easy for readers to pick out key information. Here’s why.

Online reading is an experience that’s different from reading text in print. A big part of that difference is physical: For most people, online reading takes longer—or feels as though it does. A computer screen displays text at a lower resolution, with less detail and sharpness than a printed page, so letters are fuzzier. And many people feel that their eyes tire faster reading text on a screen (especially a smaller screen) than reading type on paper.

Most online readers scan first. According to computer usability expert Jakob Nielsen, “People rarely read Web pages word by word; instead, they scan the page, picking out individual words and sentences.” Eye-tracking studies, which examine where people’s eyes roam on a webpage, reveal these basic truths about site visitors:

- They scan to see whether the content is relevant.
- They are more likely to scan the top of the page than the bottom.
- They look at headings, boldfaced terms, and images.

Scanning requires less brainpower than reading. Concise sentences that convey their point quickly are more likely to grab visitors than long, complex sentences and are more likely to entice people to explore further.

Get to the point
Readers assess webpages in an instant. Your content has a few seconds—three or less!—to encourage people to read more, to take action, or to navigate to another of your pages. Impatient readers will click the Back button in a hurry or will stop skimming and go to a search box.

To get to the point fast and keep people on your site, follow these three guidelines for effective online writing:

1. Keep it short.
   - Use short words, short sentences, short paragraphs, bulleted lists, and short pages.
   - Slim down copy from print sources (a company brochure, for example) to suit the online format.

2. Front-load your content.
• In general, put the most important content in the upper-left area of the screen. Put other important pieces of information at the top of the page.

• Decide what’s most important to communicate, and emphasize it with prominent headings, boldface type, and other visual cues.

• Put the most important information at the beginning of headlines, paragraphs, and sentences. Don’t spend time leading up to your point.

• Place the most important words at the beginning of page titles, headlines, subheadings, and links. The most important words are typically your keywords, which are the words and phrases people may use in search engines when trying to locate your type of content. For information on keyword selection and placement, see “SEO basics.”

• Place important but supplemental or tangential material in a secondary position on the page.

TIP: If your content is unavoidably lengthy or complex, consider putting a summary or a bulleted list of topics that the page covers at the top of the page.


• Include only one or two ideas per short paragraph.

• Choose common words over more difficult ones. Even if more technical or sophisticated language is appropriate for your site, your readers will appreciate simpler language in the areas where their eyes are scanning to determine what a page is about.

Page titles

The page title is the band of text you see at the top of your browser window. The page title, or <title> tag, is one of the most important pieces of copy on your site. It tells site visitors what they can expect to find on the page, and for people with a slow Internet connection, it’s often the first text they see.

The title of this page is “News, Blogs, and Tools for Living Green | Yahoo! Green.” The text is entered into the HTML code making up the page, inside the <title> element, which looks something like this: <title> News, Blogs, and Tools for Living Green | Yahoo! Green </title>. (To learn how the <title> tag and other HTML elements make up a webpage, see “Coding basics.”)

The page title will appear in many places, such as:

• The title bar of most browser windows
• The label of a browser tab
• A list of search results, as the link text
• A Favorites or Bookmarks menu (consider how the title will look in a long list of bookmarks)
• A browser’s Back and Forward menus and History panel
The Windows taskbar
The program-switching Alt+Tab interface on a PC

Because it can appear in so many places, the page title is a key component in building an informative user experience. The page title also carries weight with search engines—and it’s often ignored or forgotten by site creators. Take this snippet of text seriously.

Follow these page-title guidelines:

- **Make the first 65 characters count.** Most search engines index the first 65 characters, which can become the linked headings on search-results pages. Put the most descriptive words about your webpage first in the title, and don’t waste a single character.

- **Use the words that people will most likely type into search engines** when they’re seeking content like yours. If your product or company name is well-known and will probably be part of people’s search queries, use the name in homepage and other top-level page titles. But if people are more likely to search on words other than your product or service name, make those words prominent in your page titles. You may even want them to precede your site or company name.

- **Give each page a title that reflects its specific content and purpose.** Don’t just paste the same title onto every page. Deep-level page titles, such as product detail pages, should communicate distinct, descriptive content and use words that people may search on.

- **Use consistent syntax** (such as site name - section title - page name) for titles on pages of the same level.

Writing and styling alt text

*Alt text* is the description that you type into an image’s alt HTML attribute, in the HTML code for the page. If an image doesn’t load, its alt-text description appears in its place. Blind people who use the Tab key and a screen reader instead of a mouse to access your site will hear the alt text spoken by the computer.

Example

*When the image appears*
What the “green collar” economy means for you

By Lori Bongorno  Posted Thu Jan 29, 2009 6:21 pm PST for greenicks  138 Comments

Learn which industries will benefit from the new economic stimulus plan and what old skills can be repurposed into eco-friendly jobs. Read full post »

TIP: Alt text also helps search engines find images when people limit their search to images. Using keywords in your alt text (that is, using the words people would typically type into a search engine to find your content) is one aspect of search engine optimization.

Always consider your audience when writing alt text. Will the description be useful to people viewing it on mobile devices? To people hearing it spoken by a screen reader? Some best practices for styling alt text follow.

- Write alt text that is specific to each image.
- Limit alt text to a phrase or one short sentence.
- Make the alt text meaningful and functional in the context of the page rather than merely descriptive. For instance, if you have a picture of a pen next to your email link, “Send us an email” is more meaningful alt text for the image than “Picture of a pen.”

TIP: If an image is merely decorative and does not contribute to the page’s text or have a function associated with it (for example, it is not clickable), many authorities recommend leaving the alt attribute empty so that a person using a screen reader will not have to spend time listening to the
SEO basics
Search engines help connect Internet users with the information they’re seeking. Here’s how search engines work:

Search engines analyze the words on webpages, especially words that are repeated or otherwise called out: in boldface, in a headline, in a link, and so on. The engine records those important words and phrases—the page’s keywords—on its servers.

When you type the words you’re looking for into a search box, the engine tries to match your words with the words from webpages it has analyzed, and it then delivers a list of matches. The engine organizes that list from best to worst, ranking the results according to a variety of criteria (such as how many other sites find a page valuable and link to it).

People usually click the links on the first page of results, so sites at the top of the list are more likely to get visitors. And more visitors can mean more page views, more leads, more sales, more ad revenue, and other business benefits.

A number of SEO (search engine optimization) techniques exist to give sites an advantage in this ranking, and many of these apply to Web design. But as a content creator, your best SEO techniques are (1) to write information-rich copy that people will want to read and link to and (2) to figure out which words people are likely to use in searches, and then embed those keywords throughout your copy.

SEO copywriting is about using the exact terms that people are searching on so that it’s completely obvious what your page or article is about. SEO copywriting is not about trying to trick search engines by stuffing content with unrelated keywords or with so many keywords that the copy sounds silly. Good SEO copywriting makes your page more readable for both search engines and humans. It helps your website attract visitors, but it also helps your visitors find substantial, relevant content.

Best practices in brief
SEO is competitive: There’s no guarantee that you’ll be able to get your site on a first page of search results. But as a content creator, you can help bump up your site’s ranking just by optimizing the text and links.

Here are the basic principles of good SEO for writers and editors:

• Offer original content with genuine value and relevance to your readers.
- Strategically seed your copy with keywords that describe your content and that correspond with the phrases people are using to perform their searches.
- Embed keywords where they matter most: in the title, headings, links, metadata, and image and video tags.
- Make every page of your site unique: In addition to original content, each page should have its own topic, title, and page-specific keywords (though you can use the highest-volume keywords throughout your site—see “Keyword research tools” for assistance in finding the best keywords).
- Deliver on the promise of your keywords: Don’t lure people to your site with words that don’t accurately represent your content.
- Link to other relevant sites, and encourage those sites to link to yours.
- Optimize your site for people first—through clear, concise writing—and for search engines second. Implement SEO without turning your text into nonsense.

**TIP:** All the SEO copywriting skill in the world won’t help your site if a search engine can’t read it. This is the case with text saved as an image: The image looks like a blank portion of the page to a search engine. Avoid saving text as an image.

**How search engines read a webpage**

Even though people and search engines scan webpages differently, there are some similarities:

- **Page title.** Both people and search engines need to know at a glance what a page is about. The page title, sometimes called the `<title>` tag, is inserted in the code of a webpage.
- **Headlines, emphasized words, and lists.** Both people and search engines know that anything called out in headlines or subheadings, in boldface or italics, or in bulleted lists is likely to be important.
- **Introduction and conclusion.** Readers will scan your opening paragraph or your summary for quick information. And search engines, to understand what the subject of a page is, look for keywords throughout that page, including at the top (the introduction) and the bottom (the conclusion). But don’t just shove keywords into the top or the bottom of your page—distribute them evenly throughout.
- **Related links.** Humans appreciate options for more information. Search engines, too, like to see that you’ve linked to other websites and that other websites have linked to yours.