

ACADEMIC ■ IMPRESSIONS

Writing Right for the Web | 03.25.2008

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Q&A

Q: How similar to broadcast journalism writing is Web writing? Seems very similar: Short, in present tense with punchy verbs.

Very similar. Indeed, you've described how the writing style for web content that's intended for a general audience. Specialized content, as intended for members of a particular professional audience who have their own language, might be different.

Q: Is it better to use hyperlinks within the text of a paragraph, or link something like "For more info on tuition, click here" at the end of the paragraph?

Not a hard and fast rule here. If the paragraph is short, the link certainly can be at the end. See <http://www.stonehill.edu/admissions/> for an example of this.

Q: Should the live links open in a new window or the same window?

- Hilary Nelson at Purdue University (and one other person whose email I deleted by mistake) remembered my answer that I hadn't seen any research on this and decided to help me out with references to Jakob Nielsen columns. Here are Hilary's links and comments:
 - <http://www.useit.com/alertbox/990530.html>
 - <http://www.useit.com/alertbox/20021223.html> (item 6)
 - http://www.useit.com/alertbox/open_new_windows.html
 - http://www.useit.com/alertbox/within_page_links.html

"The first two argue against opening a new window because it violates the user's expectations, and takes control away from them. (If they want it in a new window, they'll just command-click the link.)

The third one says it's a good idea to open a new window if the link is to a PDF or other non-HTML document.

The fourth touches on links to anchors within a page, which he doesn't think is a good idea unless you tell people that's where the link will be going."

- The Nielsen recommendation starts back with general web guidelines in 1999. I'd agree with this comment from Hilary; "Just because Nielsen says something doesn't mean it's true, but I've learned to give his recommendations a lot of weight."

Q: Is there a specific length for the page title?

No. As a rule of thumb, stay within the limits of what you can see at the top of the page. In just about every case, that should be plenty of room. Also remember that you might not need to use the full name of your school if it takes up too much of the real estate. Search for shorter variations in use and see if that doesn't get you to the same place as the more formal version. You can also test versions in Wordtracker to see which ones are in most common use.

Q: does metadata still have value?

Q: Metatarsi - are they still useful?

I've been reading for two or three years now that metadata has less and less value in standing with search engines. And in one of my UC Davis web writing sessions this past week, one of the staff people said she'd been a meeting last October where a Google person told her that metadata is no longer used at all by Google. That same person thought Yahoo ranked it quite low if at all. No word on Ask or Live Search.

Q: How should live links embedded in the text be entered?

- "You'll find details about our scholarships here."
- Is that what you had in mind? This is one way to do it... a sentence like this might be included at the end of a paragraph that said scholarships were available and included some general information about them. Depending on what content was available, it might also say "Use our online scholarship calculator to see what your award amount might be."
- In some cases, you might still consider a simple "click here" although that has fallen out of favor with many. In a session last fall, a person with a direct marketing background reminded me that in dual-testing situation where the content was designed to create an immediate response, the directness of "click here" produced more responses than the more indirect examples above.

Q: Should you use "you" if you have multiple audiences.

- Not quite sure if I'm reading this right or not, so feel free to follow-up if you want.
- If you know that the reader of a page is likely to be a single reader, no matter the audience they come from, then "you" is appropriate.

Q: How does writing right for the web impact accessibility concerns (universal design)?

Q: Could you speak to how "writing right" improves accessibility?

- To the first question, the answer is "yes." The following links should help you explore this further.
 - <http://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG10-CORE-TECHS/#writing-style>
 1. Strive for clear and accurate headings and link descriptions. This includes using link phrases that are terse and that make sense when read out of context or as part of a series of links (Some users browse by jumping from link to link and listening only to link text.) Use informative headings so that users can scan a page quickly for information rather than reading it in detail.
 2. State the topic of the sentence or paragraph at the beginning of the sentence or paragraph (this is called "front-loading"). This will help both people who are skimming visually, but also people who use speech synthesizers. "Skimming" with speech currently means that the user jumps from heading to heading, or paragraph to paragraph and listens to just enough words to determine whether the current chunk of information (heading, paragraph, link, etc.) interests them. If the main idea of the paragraph is in the middle or at the end, speech users may have to listen to most of the document before finding what they want. Depending on what the user is looking for and how much they know about the topic, search features may also help users locate content more quickly.
 3. Limit each paragraph to one main idea.
 4. Avoid slang, jargon, and specialized meanings of familiar words, unless defined within your document.
 5. Favor words that are commonly used. For example, use "begin" rather than "commence" or use "try" rather than "endeavor."
 6. Use active rather than passive verbs.
 7. Avoid complex sentence structures.
 - <http://www.redish.net/content/papers/interactions.html> **Guideline 1.** Write for the web. Write in short, clear, straightforward sentences. Use bulleted lists. Put the main point at the beginning of a paragraph. Write links that start with keywords."
 - Also see Nielsen at <http://www.useit.com/alertbox/20030407.html>

Q: What are your thoughts on white text on a black background?

- For regular blocks of text, that's a very unnatural way to present content. Not terribly user friendly at all. In limited use as a design element, probably OK.
- The deciding criteria in areas like this should always be: is the design getting in the way of helping a normal human being read what's here? If it is, don't do it.

Q: The Mt Holyoke Mag seems to be very long paragraphs. Is that good?

Long paragraphs are seldom good. The Mt. Holyoke example was used to show the adaptation to the blog format to present the content. Personally, I'd do more editing of the stories themselves for the website presentation and that includes shorter paragraphs.

Q: Any thoughts on creating Spanish or second language versions of webpages?

That's fine if it fits the needs of your audience(s). Canadian college and university websites use French and English versions. Some U.S. sites have at least selected pages in Spanish.

Q: Is there an optimal ratio of graphics to text on a page?

Can't quote an exact ratio. My personal rule of thumb is that less is better, just to avoid a slippery slope that leads to too many. Too many graphics lead to the most deadly sin of websites: too slow a download time. The same applies to first page flash pages before the "go directly to the site" message. Many ad agencies love these. Most normal people hate them.

Q: What should be the focus of a school's homepage - news, events, and admissions?

- The primary purpose of a home page for most visitors is to get them away from it as quickly as possible to where they really want to be: admissions, alumni, news, athletics, and others. Certainly the home page can include a short brand message about the school.
 - See this Peterson's Guide front page: <http://www.petersons.com/>
 - Four main audience headings. This page once was even stronger. My personal opinion is that the use of Quick Links like this keeps the visitor from immediately scanning all 4 headings on the page. In the last version, you could easily do that. Now you can't.
- Note that more and more search results, maybe most by now, give links not only to the home page but also to other significant content areas beyond the home page. Admissions and athletics are often included. Sometimes financial aid and/or scholarships. If the right content is selected, that's a great way to help people get where they want to be. And it illustrated the need to have each of those other content pages designed as if they were "start" pages on the website.
- Google for "University of Arkansas" and you'll see that not only do they do the above, but they also include a search box for their website on the "search page" result. That's not common yet but I suspect it will be more so in the future. People searching directly on your website without ever seeing it.

Q: Should we make any considerations for mobile devices?

- Within a year or two, we definitely are going to have to do that. So now is the time to start planning. Right now smart phones in the U.S. are only about 20 percent of the cell phone market. But prices are falling, as are prices of the data plans that people need to operate them. So we should start to see more and more people viewing websites from mobile devices. And that will argue even more for simple content presentation. On the tech side, a raft of new challenges to make an admissions or athletics or alumni page accessible from a smart phone.

Q: You mentioned limiting print publication in PDF format for the web. Would you clarify...? And how does this relate to applications (of any kind) or one page schedules (of any kind)?

- Happy to clarify. The "limit" PDF crusade applies especially to large size publications like viewbooks, annual reports, and alumni/university magazines that were created as a print publication. These are especially difficult to read online. And expecting that very many people will invest in the quality of paper and quantity of ink to actually print and read them is a fantasy.
- Other types of documents, created especially for the web environment as PDFs, can be fine. The Pew Internet project people have lots of research reports on line as PDFs that are easy to read online themselves, or download for later reading on the computer, or print.

Q: Could we please have a copy of the session's questions and answers? I think you're comments to all would be of interest and benefit to all participants.

And indeed, that's what this document will do.

Q: When links appear in a list, how should they be organized--alpha or some other way?

Depends on the list. If we are listing links to academic programs, I'd always put those in alpha order. If we were listing attributes of a particular program (see the Kenan-Flagler example), I'd list by priority of interest area if I had good insight on what that was. The most popular "carewords" topics first, for instance.

Q: some university marketers find the use of "you" to be too informal and undercuts a school's prestige. What would you say to that?

A personal opinion, of course, but I'd say that's nonsense. Prestige should be built on much more than relaxed use of the language. Alas, some people at colleges and universities confuse "pompous" with "prestige" in many areas, including websites.

Q: In your opinion, how many links on one page is considered too many?

- I don't have a firm opinion on this. The answer really depends on the individual page.
- Consider the Stonehill College admissions page at <http://www.stonehill.edu/admissions/>
 - Quite a few links on this page, but each one serves the specific purpose of taking a visitor to more information about a particular topic on the page. Much better than presenting the information without links and leaving the visitor to puzzle how where to go for more information.

Q: What is the best way to handle 'contact us' pages? Often there is the desire to list everyone in your organization - how can we suggest that this is not the best way to handle this

- "Contact us" pages are OK, but not an ideal solution. Better to list contact information on specific web pages where you think a visitor might want to contact someone after reading the page content. And best then to include the information (at least phone and email) in the right hand column for maximum visibility. In this case, one person's name is usually enough.
- That said, people do want to use website to find people and a contact page can serve that purpose. Try to limit the page to one contact for each major office if you can designate a person for that. Some obvious exceptions exist, including admissions recruiters by territory and athletic coaches by sport. (But contact info in athletics should also exist on the primary page for each sport and not force visitors back to a page listing all coaches to find an email address for the soccer coach.

Q: Are all the suggestions you've provided applicable for two-year as well as four-year institutions? Any differences for two-year colleges?

Everything covered in the presentation is applicable to two-year institutions.

Q: Do you have any suggestions about the use of drop down links rather than regular navigation?

Drop-down links can help people get more quickly to where they want to go and that's a good thing. Like any feature, they can be misused; many contain too many new links when they open. Some are overly tricky to actually get to the new link and activate it.

Q: Also, do you have thoughts about how long a page should be if anchors are used to navigate within them?

Again, I'd suggest that common sense is a good guideline here. You don't want so many headings at the top of the page that they are difficult to scan. So that makes me say, don't have more than 10 topics at the top. On this first page, keep page length within limits by not trying to put all the content about the topic on this page if it runs more than a paragraph or two. If that's the case, include the most important content (as in "what's most important to the visitor") on this page, then include a link to more content about that topic.

Q: Would you please expand on what you mean by "blog format" for content?

- Easiest to do this with examples. See what Santa Clara law school is doing at <http://www.scu.edu/law/blog/> with the 18 "blogs" listed.
- Similar to the Texas A&M System use of the "blog format" for press releases, Santa Clara is using a blog structure to deliver regular, recurring news. These are not blogs in the sense of an individual writing about a topic of interest and inviting comments.

Q: When links appear in a list, how should they be organized--alpha or some other way?

A list of academic majors should definitely be in alpha order. But other than that, in most cases I'd try to list the links with areas of highest interest first rather than in alpha order. Measure that by how often links on the list are actually checked.

Q: Versus Web Trends, what web analytic reporting program do you recommend best?

I'd give serious attention to Google Analytics if a primary goal is to get as many people to use an analytics tool on their own. The University of Missouri is adopting Google Analytics for this reason and it seems a smart decision to me.

Q: New College of Florida: what do you think about hosting your college newspaper online on the official site?

Another personal opinion from a former editor of his college newspaper: that's a great idea. And somewhere in the past couple of years I remember seeing a research report that the number one thing recent alumni wanted to continue to access online was the student newspaper. Much more interest in that than in publications especially for alumni.

Q: Is there evidence that navigation style varies considerably with users' personality types, right-brain/left brain, etc.?

Haven't seen anything on that. If anyone reading this has something to share, send it along to the email at the end and I'll post on my blog and/or in the monthly newsletter.

Q: Do you have a list of "care words" for independent schools?

No, not specifically for independent schools. I'm assuming you mean prep schools. We've not done the research for anyone in that category. And of course, for any individual school there are likely variations within a category. MBA or law school prospects, for instance, do not likely have an exactly similar set of carewords depending on factors that include plans for full or part-time study, or online or in-class programs.

Q: Comment on use of favicons.

- I'll confess to never having given this a serious thought. And so I did a search for "favicons usability" while noting that my spell checker doesn't yet recognize the term.
- For those interested, try <http://www.johanrooms.com/favicons.php>
- And for a discussion focused on favicons for branding and marketing, see <http://www.jenniferslegg.com/2007/04/07/should-a-favicon-be-part-of-your-online-branding-marketing-presence/>
- I'll explore this a bit more later, but for now I'm not yet seeing anything that says these are an essential element in an online branding or marketing program. Possibly "nice" but not "necessary."

Q: Hi Bob, I'd like to get your newsletter-where do I signup?

You can subscribe at www.bobjohnsonconsulting.com in the lower left hand section of the page. Or you can send me an email at bob@bobjohnsonconsulting.com and I'll do it for you.

If anyone here has a follow-up question that you think can be answered relatively quickly, send it along to me at bob@bobjohnsonconsulting.com

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