# 10 Rules for Effective Writing for the Web

You've probably heard it before -- "content is king." It's a common mantra in the Internet community, and it seems obvious. And yet, few firms spend anywhere near the same amount of time, money, and energy on their web site content as they do on design and graphics. Splashy graphics can indeed capture attention, but most visitors are driven by a quest for information.

Whether your site is simple "brochureware" or a complex e-commerce site, visitors come for the content. They may find the visual effects appealing, but, if the content they seek is not easily found and easily processed, they will move on to another site. Many firms set up elaborate and costly systems to ensure their sites feature "fresh" content, but neglect to take simple yet essential steps to make that content effective.

The need for relevant information to be easily found and processed explains why effective web content plays by different rules than copy used in print materials. According to web usability guru Jakob Nielsen, 79% of online users don't read text word-for-word but instead scan the page. Because of this, and the fact that reading from a computer screen is 25 percent slower than from paper, he advises that web content use only half the word count of its print counterpart.

Sounds daunting, doesn't it? You may be thinking, "How can I get my message across with only half the words of our marketing collateral? Every word is significant!" Adhering to the content guidelines below can point you in the right direction.

#1: Follow the "inverted pyramid" format. News writers commonly apply the inverted pyramid format. Pick up a newspaper, and you'll notice that most stories lay out the most important information (often referred to as the "five Ws"-who, what, where, why, and when) in the first paragraphs. This information forms the base of the story, with the less crucial information pushed toward the bottom. In the same way, a web page should provide its most important information at the beginning of the content to increase the likelihood that the visitor will be exposed to it. What do you want the visitor to take away from this page? Say it first.

#2: Eliminate unnecessary words.  Or, in the immortal words of Strunk and White in *The Elements of Style* , "Omit needless words." The nature of the Internet instills users with a gnawing impulse to keep moving, so your window of opportunity is small. Eliminating unnecessary words places the emphasis on the key content and, of course, decreases that troublesome word count.

#3: Use the active voice. Regardless of the medium, print or online, most writing can be improved by the use of the active voice over passive voice. The active voice, where the subject of a sentence performs the action described by the verb,

is more direct, powerful, and engaging. And using the active voice often leads naturally to the following technique.

#4: Use short, simple sentence structure. The scanning user finds short, simple sentence structures the easiest to process. Don't make your reader pause to decide if he or she is reading something correctly. Steve Krug, another usability expert, probably put it best in the title of his book, *Don't Make Me Think: A Common Sense Approach to Web Usability.*

#5: "Chunk" your information. Present your information in "chunks" of content. Use each paragraph or chunk to relay only one idea. Your visitors are most likely scanning, so they are unlikely to take away more than one idea from a paragraph. By chunking, you minimize the risk that they will miss something you want to convey.

#6: Use bulleted lists. Bulleted lists are a web writer's friends. They slow the reader's eye, and draw attention to the listed information. When presenting a series of three or more items, a bulleted list is processed much more easily than a long sentence punctuated by repeated commas or semicolons.

#7: Limit scrolling/insert jumplinks. Web users don't like to scroll. Just as newspaper readers often assume the biggest news will be featured "above the fold," web users assume the most significant information will appear on the screen in front of them, without scrolling. If you must use lengthy content that requires scrolling, offer the user jumplinks for quick access to the content relevant to them.

#8: Highlight important, informative words. You can't fight the users' tendency to scan, so you might as well help them. Highlighting key words with bold or a consistent use of colored fonts makes it more likely that those words will be among the words scanned. Highlight liberally-in general, you can highlight three times as many words as you would in print.

#9: Avoid marketese. Web users bring a certain sense of suspicion with them. They know that anyone can launch a web site and make all types of claims. Credibility counts, so use objective language, rather than exaggerated, subjective claims.

#10: Make your copy 100 percent error-free. Your web site may be the first impression your firm makes, and errors can raise questions about your attention to detail and professionalism. Eliminate all errors, including typographical, grammatical, and spelling errors. Such errors are jarring and distract readers from your message.

Following these rules will allow you to communicate more effectively online, while enhancing your web site visitors' experiences and impressions of your firm.

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