

Writing for the Internet: 17 Simple Rules

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17 Simple **Rules to Keep 'Em Reading** Your Content

Do you want your web site's content to hold visitors' interest longer? Your ezine readers to keep their fingers off the delete key? Your customers to buy your next ebook? If so, follow these simple rules and recommendations.

Reading online is about 25% slower than reading from print and it's a lot harder on the eyes. Although people browsing the Web are looking for information, they're also very impatient. Therefore **most visitors to your web site will only scan your content**; they won't read it.

You probably scan when you read the newspaper so you know what I mean. You glance at the headlines and from there choose the article you want to read. This happens on the Web, too, but even more so. Within an article or web page, people will scan for sub-headlines. So, whereas they'll read the whole article in the newspaper, they'll only read bits and pieces of it on the Web.

Armed with this knowledge, you can make your content much easier for people to read.

1. **Provide a Table of Contents** at the beginning of long pages.

Adding a Table of Contents to the beginning of your article or ezine enhances a reader's experience.

Here's a recent comment from one of my ezine subscribers:

"First off, I really like the **'Tell-em-what-they're-going-to-get' approach** to the header of your ezine. Just had to tell you."

He's talking about my Table of Contents. Something so simple, yet it warranted a comment from a reader.

If your article or ezine is in HTML format, use the **"named anchor"** tag to make the items in your Table of Contents clickable.

Note: Not everyone's email software renders HTML properly. Always offer your readers a plain text version of your newsletter. One day we'll all use HTML for our ezines, but we're not quite there yet. Some autoresponders and email management software will "sniff out" a recipient's ability to render HTML and deliver the appropriate email (for this to work, you have to write two versions of your newsletter-- one in plain text and one in HTML).

2. **Break up your page** with sub-headlines.

Provide your readers with **the ability to scan** your page and pick out the topics that interest them. If you don't **provide sub-headlines**, there's a very good chance your readers will skip the page entirely.

On a web page or in an ebook, use a different colour for the sub-headlines or bold them. In an ezine, you should set them off with bullets, numbers or underlines.

You can also type headings in all capital letters, but this will make them harder to scan. Most people use shape to help them recognize words. If you use all capital letters, you remove this ability and slow the reader down. **Remember, impatience is the norm on the Internet, so try not to put up any road blocks to easy reading.**

3. **Break up passages.**

Notice how all my **paragraphs are short**? No more than a few lines each? I strive to keep each paragraph to no more than 100 words. That's **to provide small chunks** of information that can be easily digested.

Note: Just because a paragraph is 109 words, doesn't mean you have to automatically try to break it into two smaller paragraphs. Just use common sense and you'll be fine.

4. **Create white space** to reduce eye-fatigue.

Breaking up your page into small paragraphs creates plenty of white space to rest the reader's eyes. It's important to minimize readers' fatigue so they'll keep reading. If this article were written as one long chunk, you wouldn't be reading it by now.

5. **Shorter sentences** are easier to read.

As you may also have noticed, this article is not made up of long, convoluted sentences. Each sentence is fairly short and therefore easily read at a glance.

You don't want to tax readers thinking either. Shorter sentences are easier to understand and digest. If you want people to "get" your message, keep your sentences short.

6. Use **short lines** of text.

When writing your ezine, **use a text editor and set it to put a hard return after every 65 characters. That will ensure your ezine articles have short lines** that can be read at a glance. I use TextPad for this (<http://www.textpad.com>).

When I'm finished writing my ezine content, I cut and paste the text into my autoresponder and it retains the hard returns. You can also cut and paste your text into the body of an email.

On your web page, **use a table to contain your text**. Do NOT set your table to 100% width. If you do, it will stretch to fit any sized browser and your lines of text will end up long and difficult to read.

7. **Use bullets**.

Bullets are read even by scanners.

8. **Enclose text in boxes or indent it**.

If you indent text, put a Horizontal Rule before and after it. This trick makes it look boxed, but is more sophisticated than using a table with a border. (**Avoid table borders any bigger than one pixel.**)

9. **Avoid busy backgrounds** on your web page.

To make text easy to read, there needs to be plenty of contrast between the background colour and the font

colour. Purple text on a red background is unreadable. Any text on a busy background is difficult to read. If you want a patterned background, that's fine, just change the colour of the table cell in which your text appears to white or a pale solid colour and make your text black or very dark.

10. **Use plain English**.

Most web pages, ezines and ebooks should **stay away from academic writing**. If you're not writing a thesis, don't write like a professor. Instead you should be aiming at a **grade level of between 6 and 8**. I'm not telling you to dumb down your text, but to make it clearer, shorter and easier to read.

11. Write in a **chatty, conversational style**.

Avoid corporate-speak. Corporate-speak is language that speaks to no one in particular. Instead, visualize one of your readers and write to that person. If you **write to someone you know**, your style will automatically be more casual, friendly and readable. People will feel you're speaking directly to them. Yes, your style might not click with everyone, but better than clicking with no one.

12. **Use contractions**.

To make your writing easier to read, use contractions. "I'll tell you more next month" reads easier than "I will tell you more next month." It's also less formal. Your ezine or sales copy is not the place for formal writing. If you currently write for print publications and want to start writing for the Web, some of the rules you live by will have to be abandoned.

13. **Choose a sans-serif font** like Verdana for your main content.

A sans serif font like **Verdana** is much **easier to read** online than **Times New Roman** or Georgia (serif fonts). Use **serif fonts for headings to provide contrast** and variety.

However, **DO NOT use more than two or three fonts** altogether. Otherwise, your text will look amateurish. It will also be hard to read, as your viewers' eyes will constantly need to adjust to the changing font style.

Virtually every book you read in print is type-set in a serif font like Times New Roman...every page, even the

chapter headings. It's not boring and no one thinks twice about it. (Note: serif fonts are easier to read in print.)

14. **Specify a font** in HTML code.

Remember to specify a font in your HTML code. If you leave the font at the default, most web browsers will render your text in Times New Roman. You don't want this to happen.

It's a good idea to specify a family of fonts so PC and Mac browsers can choose their own pre-installed fonts. I use this family of fonts: "Verdana, Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif."

Note: As a last resort, if none of the first three fonts are installed, "sans-serif" tells a browser to use any other sans-serif font it has available.

15. **Clean up typos and spelling mistakes.**

I know it sounds obvious to tell you to check your spelling, but bad spelling and typos are RAMPANT on the Web.

Run your **spell-checker, but also eyeball your content** several times. Your spell-checker will not catch typos like "form" instead of "from." Print out your text and ask someone else to read it. Preferably, someone who can spell.

I'm not just being picky, by the way. **Spelling errors and typos slow a reader down and may even confuse them.** You NEVER want to do that. If the reader loses momentum, you're dead; they'll likely stop reading and go away.

16. Use **exclamation marks sparingly!!!!**

The Internet has spawned a love affair with the exclamation mark. This poor, beleaguered symbol is so overworked on the Web I'm surprised it hasn't up and quit. It's very amateurish to saturate your text with exclamation marks. **It signals HYPE!!!! And insincerity!!!**

Prospects will become customers when they trust you. How much trust do YOU put in an ad or sales letter that's full of exclamation marks? Your readers are just as wary as you.

Note: There is a place for exclamation marks in impassioned advertising copy. Just don't over-do it. And NEVER use more than one exclamation point at the end of a sentence.

17. **Remove "that" wherever possible.**

Search for "that" and, wherever possible, remove it completely. Most instances of "that" will be required for your text to make sense, so don't go removing every "that" in your article. Just remove the ones you can. (I could've written, "Just remove the ones that you can," but I wouldn't have been following my own rule.)

Example: Call now so that you don't miss our July special.

Change to: Call now so you don't miss our July special.

Why? You glide right over the words in the second sentence, but in the first sentence, the word "that" halts you for a split second. And as we know, any stumbling block, no matter how minor, can mean bye-bye reader.

This isn't all there is to know about writing for the Internet, of course. But if you follow these simple rules, you'll go a long way toward keeping your readers glued to your text. Hopefully, long enough to entice them to sign up for your newsletter, join your affiliate program or buy your product.

Take-Away Tip: Remember, most online readers are actually scanners. To get scanners to stop long enough to read your content, you must **make your text visually appealing and effortless to read. Use short, simple sentences, plain English, contractions, short paragraphs, lots of sub-headlines and a friendly voice.**

About The Author

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