



Style Guide for Electronic Documents

Tips for Creating Effective Web Pages, PDFs, and the Like

Introduction: It's Different Now

We here at Bethany are justifiably invested in how we write, and we do it well—after all, we are a graduate school, and our faculty are not only wordsmiths, but publish on a regular basis. So why would I even dare to create a writing guide to be shared with such a group?

Why, indeed? Because, to put it quite simply, writing for electronic documents is different than writing for print. And since our fine-tuned ability to write in what has been the traditional way might become a block as we write for a new medium and new way of reading, I offer this guide as a way to help wordsmiths (and the rest of us) think about these differences and further sharpen our writing abilities for new sorts of audiences.

Two primary observations highlight why our writing for electronic documents must be different than what we are traditionally used to creating for print, if they are to be effective. First, people do not read the same way on a screen. Studies show that people reading electronic documents scan for content, and jump from topic to topic, as opposed to traditional straight sequential reading.¹ (This is true even for sight-impaired persons.²) Second, electronic documents have far greater potential for interaction than do print publications, due to the inherent hypertext capabilities – that is, the ability to embed hyperlinks that allow a reader to pursue different threads of information with a simple click, taking readers to destinations within the documents we create as well as externally. Both these factors point to the non-linear aspect of electronic documents, and lead us to consider a different writing style if we wish to communicate at our best.

In many cases, electronic writing is also about communicating with words that drive actions. Not only do most readers scan electronic documents, skimming for the information that seems pertinent, it has been shown that reading from computer screens is slower than reading from paper. Such invites us to tighten up our prose and implement a few helpful techniques if we are to keep the reader's attention. These techniques, I might add, are also becoming more and more useful in reaching a new generation of readers with shorter attention spans and limited time.

These differences are what has driven the creation of this Style Guide, or more accurately, this collection of Style Tips. While web pages certainly differ from pdfs, and wikis from postings, there are nevertheless many similarities arising from these new ways of communicating. Here following, therefore, are some helpful tips to assist you as you prepare electronic documents.

One-Page Overview: Organize for Scanning

Points to Remember ³

- ▶ Users won't read your text thoroughly in a word-by-word manner.
Exhaustive reading is rare, especially when people are conducting their initial read-through to see what the document is about. Yes, some people will read more—but most simply won't. (*Check yourself: how are you reading this very document?*)
- ▶ The first two paragraphs must state the most important information.
There's some hope that users will actually read this material, though they'll probably read more of the first paragraph than the second.
- ▶ Subheads, paragraphs, and bullet points must start with information-carrying words.
Users will notice only the first few words when scanning down the left side of your content. This is the form that most scanning takes. Readers will read the third word on a line much less often than the first two words.
- ▶ Hyperlinks aren't just something to add in later; they are an essential part of the plan.
While the use of hyperlinks is one of the newest innovation coming to influence writing styles, and so may be the least comfortable for those who have already written much, their use is an important step to writing well for electronic documents.

Helpful Strategies ^{4 5 6}

- ▶ Plan before writing, so as to organize your content as a set of related topics.
- ▶ Design from shallow to deep: the first page should contain short text that brings the reader deeper into the subject. As they link deeper you can provide more detailed content.
- ▶ The inverted pyramid style of writing, starting with the conclusion, is a helpful approach.
- ▶ Keep information short; write in small chunks.
- ▶ Be direct: get to the point. Explain in precise, simple language exactly what you have to say to the reader.
- ▶ Aim for about half the word count (or less) than conventional writing.
- ▶ Incorporate just one idea per paragraph. (Users tend to miss any additional ideas if they are not caught by the first few words in the paragraph, because they skip on.)
- ▶ Limit the number of layers/subsets to a maximum of three header levels.
- ▶ Help facilitate navigation for readers by using menus, tables of contents and content summaries.
- ▶ Guide the reader by directing them to salient points through using meaningful headings and lists.
- ▶ Use highlighting, like bold and italics, only where needed, and eliminate such use elsewhere. (When a reader scans your page, anything that is different will draw the eye, and become a distraction.)
- ▶ Use white space! (This should go without saying, but space makes the content on the page easier to read by providing a rest for the eyes between other elements, and helps those scanning to find important sequences.)
- ▶ Integrate logical hyperlinks. (Use care with hyperlinks that interrupt the flow of the text or take the user to another train of thought.)

Drilling Down: More Specific Tips

Here is a collection of specific tips for your consideration, grouped into different categories. ⁷

1. Organize Outright

- ▶ Prepare content in inverted pyramid style, beginning with the most important and relevant information. Identify a good lead; details follow; and background information should come last or be in another web page or section (in which case it is present simply through links).
- ▶ Let the reader know what to expect. Think ahead about descriptions of documents, information about links, etc., and how this will all fit together.
- ▶ Choose meaningful and relevant graphics to integrate with your text early on, as these will likely influence your text.
- ▶ Plan to group content whenever possible so that your content is presented in segments, and keep an eye toward logical flow (more below).
- ▶ Incorporate meaningful headings for groups to guide readers.
- ▶ Use bulleted lists (more below on these, too).

2. Stay Simple

Keep your message simple and direct. Concise is key! Try to do the following

- ▶ Avoid clutter.
- ▶ Be clear and concise in your writing style and formatting. When writing for a more general audience (like the web), use plain language geared at an eighth-grade level whenever possible.
- ▶ Use about half the word count as compared to conventional writing, due to readers scanning your content, as well as not being able to read electronic documents as quickly as in print.

3. Recognize Relevance

A good writer will recognize and account for the level of interest in what is on the page for different readers. Therefore, strive to help readers get their desired level of information as quickly as possible. Knowledge of and writing to these interest levels will increase the satisfaction of all readers.

Once you know what is relevant, emphasize those pieces, bring them to the top of the page and top of the paragraph through headings and inverted pyramid writing . . . and consider how to trim the rest!

4. Include Interest

Use original ideas in each section. Original ideas will increase the value of the message and the organization that delivers it. Striking headlines and intriguing content can get your content noticed and read. In the same vein, use action verbs, and use the active voice rather than the passive voice. For example, “I compiled these tips” (active voice) is significantly different to readers than “These tips were compiled by me” (passive voice).

5. Create Consistency

The look, tone and organization of your sections should be consistent. Users should know what they can expect where so they can easily find information.

While consistency is particularly important for web pages within a particular site, it also applies to larger documents in the ways that content is organized into groups, headings are constituted and displayed, and hyperlinks are used.

6. Go with Groupings

Provide information in segmented form via groups. A well-constructed group provides readers with a comprehensive but limited chunk of information (use links to related or supporting pages for further reading). Groups also allow reader to focus on a particular (sub)topic of interest, and provide a way for readers returning to a document at a later time to more quickly locate the specific information they seek. It is best to keep to only one main organizational idea per group.

7. Have Headings

- ▶ The top of each group, and subgroups if used, should be informative, allowing users to decide if it is of interest to them (remember, readers are scanning).
- ▶ Use a large font for the topmost heading.
- ▶ Make sure that headings clearly indicate the content of the sections. Word headings meaningfully, so the reader knows what the content will be (and perhaps why the content is important).
- ▶ Organize your text so that the heading hierarchy is no deeper than three levels. Too many lower-level headings will become disorienting to readers.

8. Lean on Lists

Consider using bulleted or numbered lists rather than paragraphs– but only when your content lends itself to such treatment. Readers can pick out information far more easily from a list than from within a paragraph.

- ▶ You can include more lists within electronic documents and web pages than on printed pages.
- ▶ Be sure to use numbered lists when the order of entries is important.
- ▶ Use unnumbered lists whenever the sequence of the entries is not important.
- ▶ Try to limit the number of items in a single list to no more than nine.
- ▶ Generally, limit lists to no more than two levels: primary and secondary.

9. Consider Captions

Captions are sometimes necessary on webpages that include graphics or images which are relevant to the content, particularly when it is difficult to associate the illustration with your text.

- ▶ Ensure that the caption uniquely identifies the illustration or table. For example, do not give the same name to the caption as you have given to a head on the same page or another page.
- ▶ Don't number illustrations sequentially by chapter or section. If a screen capture has more than one illustration to which you must refer, use a simple numbering scheme (Figure 1, Figure 2). If you follow the “one idea per paragraph” guideline, however, figure numbers often won't be necessary.
- ▶ Don't include figure captions unless you need them or have a lot of conceptual or reference material.
- ▶ Try to embed the graphics or images in such a way that they are present along with the references to them in your text. Such can simplify captions, or eliminate them altogether.

. . . and finally . . . the one thing that really makes electronic documents distinct . . .

10. Have Hyperlinks!!

Hyperlinks (really “hypertext links” but also just “links”) are essential for referencing the reader to other places in your document, web page, or web site, as well as off-site background materials and additional resources. Here are some tips on how to best use links:

- ▶ Hyperlinks should be clearly visible (whether color, font, underlining) to readers.
- ▶ The reader should know where every hyperlink will take them, without having to click.
- ▶ Don’t mention that you are providing links at all. For example, rather than making a link “Click here to contact us,” simply make “Contact us” the link itself.
- ▶ For link text, use a description of the information to be found in the link. Use the link address itself only if the reason you are including the link is clear from the context, or if providing the address is also of specific value.
- ▶ For accessibility and for clarity, provide descriptive alternate (popup) text for all links.
- ▶ Use hyperlinks to provide supplemental information like definitions of terms and abbreviations, reference information and background reading.
- ▶ As with other content, group cross-reference links under a “See Also” (or similar) heading where appropriate. Generally, such lists of cross-references are easiest to read if they include only descriptive headings or titles with a few words of explanation.
- ▶ Don’t use a hypertext link if the information can be succinctly presented on the current page.

Summary: It isn’t Rocket Science

In conclusion, apart from the newer technology of hypertext links, writing for electronic documents is not a totally different animal from the writing styles that we may have used in the past for more traditional writing. It is different, however, as it emphasizes concise and precise writing in a more highly organized style. The inverted pyramid of presenting conclusions first takes a bit of re-thinking and initial planning; brevity is prized; and logical flow, not simply in thought but as content is broken into chunks through grouping, headings, and outlines is important.

My contention is that as these best practices for writing for electronic documents are incorporated, it becomes far easier for hyperlinks to make sense, for the structure of the document then begins to lend itself to the sort of linking organization it can include. While incorporating hyperlinks is a new skill for many of us, with some good tips to guide us and a bit of practice and patience, this newer style of writing will also begin to become second nature, and will before long take its place on the roster of excellence. *Electronic* wordsmiths, indeed!

Additional Web Writing Resources

For additional reading and reflection (among many, many others):

Disclaimer: there are tons of resources out there, and I have not pretended to have found only the very best. Rather, this is a small sample of resources that I have found to be helpful! All links are valid as of the time of compilation but are not under my control.

Assessment and Justification of many of the ideas presented here can be found at “Measuring the Effect of Improved Web Writing.”

<http://www.useit.com/alertbox/9710a.html>

-A fascinating read; highly recommended.

Some best practices on web writing:

<http://www.useit.com/papers/webwriting/>

-Helpful as it addresses specific topics, even email, email newsletters, or email subjects!

<http://www.usability.gov/design/writing4web.html>

-Even discusses writing for those with disabilities.

<http://www.webdesignfromscratch.com/web-2.0-design-style-guide.cfm>

-Web 2.0 Design Guide . . . very helpful for thinking about web design.

<http://webstyleguide.com/>

-Web Style Guide, 2nd Edition. A very detailed, if still helpful, outline.

NOTES: Along with general knowledge and input from many sources, special thanks to these particular sites, which are also recommended resources for further exploration.

1. © 2006 by Jakob Nielsen, http://www.useit.com/alertbox/reading_pattern.html, and also
<http://poynterextra.org/eyetrack2004/main.htm> and
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5. Gerry McGovern, SCIP.online, volume 1 number 11, June 18, 2002,
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http://www.imakenews.com/scip2/e_article000076869.cfm
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7. <http://www.marquiscote.com/note/70>

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