

Your Guide to Writing for the Web

Best Practices for Presenting Content to Your Audience

1. Know Your *Target Audience*.

- For most Higher Ed websites, the primary audiences are students and parents.
- Secondary audiences are alumni, faculty and staff, donors and the community.
- Know what your audience is looking for and know what they need:
 - Surveys
 - Focus Groups
 - Usability Testing
 - FEEDBACK

2. Less is More!

- Unless your readers are coming to you for large amounts of information, only give them what they need.
- There should be **60 - 70 words per paragraph** at most.
- Limit each paragraph to a single idea or topic.
- **Use bullets** or numbered lists.
- Whitespace is actually a good thing.

3. No One Reads a Web Page.

- Place the most important information at the beginning of your sentence, paragraph or page.
- Users scan Web pages in an **F-shaped pattern**: two horizontal stripes followed by a vertical stripe. Keep this principle in mind when creating your content layout.

4. KISS & Talk to (not at) Your Users.

- **K**ee**P** **I**t **S**imple **S**tupid. Use everyday language and keep sentences short.
- Aim for a **5th - 8th grade reading level**.
- Engage in a two-way dialogue by using a **second person active voice**.
- Avoid buzzwords and cliches.
- Don't use "Welcome!" and "Hello!" or any "happy talk."
- Don't try to impress your audience with your IQ.

5. Don't Create Unnecessary Content.

- Only include information that is valuable to your users.
- If you don't have any frequently asked questions, then don't have a FAQ section.
- If the opposite of a statement you are using is ridiculous, don't use it.
 - Ex: "Our campus has excellent professors." For your campus not to have excellent professors is ridiculous. You want your site to be **fluff-free**.

6. Don't Just Cut & Paste.

- Don't simply copy and paste from your old site onto your new one. **Review** and **refresh** the content.
- Minimize unnecessary information and update things where necessary.
- Be consistent in your writing style (numbers, capitalization, etc.). Pay attention to spelling, grammar and sentence structure.
- Also avoid **ROT** (**R**edundant/**O**utdated/**T**rivial) information.

7. Map it Out & Make it Accessible

- Your readers must be able to easily find what they are looking for.
- Use labels, links, headers, sub-headers, bullets, etc.
- Use words that are **logical, not clever**.

- Your content should be accessible to those visitors using screen readers (e.g., JAWS). Check out the [WC3's Web Accessibility Guidelines \(http://www.w3.org/WAI/intro/wcag.php\)](http://www.w3.org/WAI/intro/wcag.php) for more information.
- Use descriptive alt tags for images and links.
- Use the name of the content, page or file that you are linking to.
 - Example: “[Application for Admission](#)” or “[Campus Maps](#)” not “[click here](#)” or “[this.](#)”
- Let your users know if the link is a file they have to download.
 - Example: “[Funding Request Form \(PDF\), \(Word\)](#)” or “[List of Approved Vendors \(Excel\)](#).”
- If possible, avoid PDF files. They take away from the website, are often large files, and are not accessible without special formatting.

8. Make it Timeless.

- **ALWAYS** keep your content **up to date**.
- Don't use dates in your content unless it's absolutely necessary.

9. The Almighty Search Engine Optimization (SEO).

- When users are searching for something, they use common terms. Keep this in mind when writing your your keywords, description, titles, etc.
- Don't use “internal speak” or industry jargon to describe things, people or processes.
- Use your keywords naturally throughout the text - don't force them in.
- Use the full department/building/program name on each page for the first mention, then you can refer to it by acronym.
 - Example: Use “Modesto Maidique Campus (MMC),” and later you can refer to it as “MMC.”
- Header elements (<h1>, <h2> and <h3>) designate what content on your page is the most important.
- Your page title should have the <h1> tag, not or . Section titles should have <h2> tags, and subtitles should have <h3> tag.

- If you are using a program like Dreamweaver or the Cascade CMS program, you can use the style options of Heading 1 or Heading 2, etc.
- Pay attention to the results your chosen keywords return.
- Research what your peers and competition are using as their keywords.

10. Four Eyes Are Better Than Two.

- Always proofread your copy, and always have a second (or even third) pair of eyes take a look over it before *and after* it goes live.

Resources:

- **Jeff Stevens**
 - [Content Strategy: Key to Effective Web Content](#)
 - <http://blog.webadmin.ufl.edu/2010/11/22/content-strategy-key-to-effective-web-content/>
- **Kaila Strong**
 - [Ten Tips for Better Website Content Writing](#)
 - <http://www.verticalmeasures.com/on-site-seo/ten-tips-for-better-website-content-writing/>
- **Rick Allen**
 - [Web Writing Guidelines for Content Contributors](#)
 - <http://meetcontent.com/blog/2011/04/web-writing-guidelines-for-content-contributors/>
- **[Anatomy of a Perfect Landing Page](#)**
 - By Formstack
 - <http://www.formstack.com/the-anatomy-of-a-perfect-landing-page>
- **[University of Waterloo](#) - *Ontario, Canada***
 - *shared their Writing for the Web course, which is part of their Skills in the Electronic Workplace (SEW) program for faculty and staff.*