

10 rules of writing for the Web

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Writing for the Web is not the same as writing for print. People read differently on the Web. They scan read—jumping quickly from one piece of content to the next. People are much more action-orientated on the Web. They get online to get something done. Words should always be driving actions.

Here are 10 rules for writing effective web content:

- 1) Know your reader
- 2) Take a publishing approach
- 3) Keep content short and simple
- 4) Write active content
- 5) Put content in context
- 6) Write for how people search
- 7) Write great headings
- 8) Write great summaries
- 9) Write great metadata
- 10) Edit. Edit. Edit.

1) Know your reader

All effective writing begins with knowing your reader. Write for your reader, not for your ego. Your reader is not everybody. The most effective writing is keenly focused on the specific needs of a clearly defined reader type. Is your reader a middle class, female American, with two kids, who lives in the suburbs?

Think like your reader thinks. Get to meet her. Once a month, talk to your reader. Read what she reads. Is there a common style and tone being used to reach her? Use it. Put a picture of your readers up on your wall. You shouldn't have more than 3-5 core reader types.

2) Take a publishing approach

Publishing is about getting the right content to the right person at the right time at the right cost. It's about getting and keeping attention with content. It's about driving actions. Publishing is about selling with content.

Back around 1995, if you went to many airline websites, you found a big picture of an aeroplane on the homepage. Now, you will find a booking process and special offers.

Killer content. The first thing publishers must get right is their killer content. What content do you have that will really drive actions? Put that on your homepage.

3) Keep content short and simple

In publishing, less is nearly always more. Remember, the one word that describes the scan reader is impatient. Here are some guidelines for the length of your content:

- Headings: 8 words or less
- Sentences: 15-20 words
- Paragraphs: 40-70 words
- Documents: 500 words or less

Get rid of all your fancy words. Get rid of your ego. Writing effectively is not about showing off. It's about communicating. It's about driving actions. Write simply. Get to the point. Then stop.

4) Write active content

The most powerful word in the English language is 'YOU.' Write from the point of view of the reader. The reader has come to your website to do something. Your content should be written in an action-orientated style. Every sentence should be moving them towards a purchase, a subscription, a solution.

5) Put content in context

The Web is about links and connections. Web content is classified and linked content. Never leave your reader at a dead-end on your website.

I wrote this article to impress you about what I know about writing for the Web. Here's the type of actions I'd like you to consider:

Find out more about my writing for the Web workshops
http://www.gerrymcgovern.com/seminar_d.htm

Get in touch with me about your content management needs
<mailto:info@gerrymcgovern.com>

Join my New Thinking weekly web content newsletter
http://www.gerrymcgovern.com/new_thinking.htm

Read a free chapter from my book, The Web Content Style Guide
http://www.gerrymcgovern.com/guide_excerpts.htm

Download a free chapter from The Web Content Style Guide (PDF 219 KB)
http://www.gerrymcgovern.com/la/writing_for_web.pdf

6) Write for how people search

Write to be found when people are searching. That means using the words your target readership is using. Before you begin writing, you need to sit down and plan the keywords you will use in your content. There are two excellent websites that will help you do this:

Wordtracker
www.wordtracker.com

Overture
<<http://inventory.overture.com/d/searchinventory/suggestion/>>

7) Write great headings

Headings are the most important piece of content you will write. That's because:

- People scan read and the first piece of content they often read is the heading. If it's not interesting, they're gone.
- The heading is often used as title metadata. This is what the search engines use on the search results page.
- The heading may be placed on a homepage as a link to the content.

When writing headings:

- Keep them to eight words or less
- Make sure you include the most important keywords
- Cut out as many adjectives and prepositions as possible (and, the, a, of)
- Be clear and precise. Avoid Shakespearean references. Avoid being clever

8) Write great summaries, sentences, paragraphs

The summary is the: who, what, where, when, how. It's about getting the facts across in 50 words or less. An objective of a summary is to make people want to read on. Keep them punchy and factual.

Sentences should be between 15-20 words. Paragraphs should be between 40-70 words. Remember, people scan read. If the first sentence in the paragraph is not interesting, they'll move on. So, always lead off a paragraph with a factual sentence.

9) Write great metadata

If you can't write good metadata, you can't write for the Web. Metadata gives web content context. You need to see metadata as an extension of grammar. You might say that metadata is web grammar.

Classification (categorization) is metadata. Focus on what classification terms are used on your website. Focus on how your content is classified. It is your responsibility to ensure that your content is properly classified. Misclassified web content might as well not have been written.

Headings and summaries are metadata. Date of publication and author information are metadata. If there's one piece of metadata that every webpage must have, it's title metadata. Every webpage should have a unique title that precisely describes the content on that page.

10) Edit. Edit. Edit.

If at all possible, get someone else to edit your content. If you are editing someone else's content:

- Take your time. Good editing can take anything from 30-50 percent of the time it took to write the original content.
- Aim to do about three edits.
- Edit first for style and tone. Ask these questions: Is it clear? Is it necessary? Is there a shorter way to say this? Is there a simpler way to say this?
- Leave the checking of grammar and spelling until last. For a thorough edit, print out the content. Get a ruler. Place the ruler at the end of the content and read backwards.

About Gerry McGovern

Gerry McGovern is an internationally acclaimed web content management consultant and author. He offers a series of workshops on content management, information architecture and writing for the Web

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