I) Intro—How We Read Web Sites

Web pages are a multimedia experience. Images, sounds and animation work together with the text to provide the user with pertinent information. Studies show that when it comes to web content, users do not read text; they scan it instead. Content written for the web requires concision and scannability. The following excerpt comes from a manual on the style of content written for the web:

- We’re usually in a hurry. Much of our Web use is motivated by the desire to save time. As a result, Web users tend to act like sharks: they have to keep moving, or they’ll die. We just don’t have the time to read any more than necessary.

- Most users scan the content quickly, read the headlines or titles, and only then decide whether to read the actual content or click the link that catches their interest.

- If we stay on the page, we know we don’t need to read everything. On most pages, we’re really only interested in a fraction of what’s on the page. We’re just looking for the bits that match our interests or the task at hand, and the rest of it is irrelevant. Scanning is how we find the relevant bits.¹

The reader doesn’t often even read the first page to find the best option—he or she will choose the first reasonable option, a strategy known as satisficing. As soon as we find a link that seems like it might lead to what we’re looking for, there’s a very good chance that we’ll click it.

Clearly, the web is a very different medium that is utilized unlike any other. Writers must consider the best way in which to present their information. Doing so ensures a user-friendly experience that increases the reliability of the site and encourages return visits.

II) Web V. Print—Writing in Style

Traditionally, printed material varies greatly in length. This means that the distribution of information can be slow or irregular. In web writing, this is the ultimate sin. By eliminating excessive verbiage in web sites, you can keep boredom and wasted user time down to a minimum.

1. Stand and Deliver
Users tend to move through a web site in a non-linear, non-predictable manner, making web pages more like newspapers than books. Topics and sections in web sites are not necessarily intended to be sequential. As such, it’s best to create content for each page that is not dependent on other sections. Users can enter a site from any page, and move between pages as they choose. Related links can help to guide the reader to background or explanatory information.

- Don’t assume that the reader has already scanned information on the prior page, or even the home page.
- Create headings and copy that stand on their own.

2. Be Brief

Readability is the main issue when dealing with web content. Ideally, documents on the web should be about half the length of a similar print document. Six hundred to seven hundred words is a reasonable average length for any online document. Since online readers tend to be impatient, economy should be the name of the game.

- Edit, shorten or just plain throw out any vague or needless words and sentences. By keeping your writing concise, you can at least ensure that your readers will make it to the end of the document (unless they’re REALLY impatient).
- Stay focused on the page’s topic, and provide the relevant information as quickly as possible.
- If the content can’t be reduced further, consider creating hypertext links to other pages and/or windows. This is known as “chunking” information (also see the “Links” section under “Web Standards”).

Here is an example of condensing information into a web-oriented writing style:

(Taken from http://www.engl.niu.edu/comskills/)

Original text:

There comes a time in every writer’s life when grammar and mechanics become important. Concerns such as correct sentence structure, spelling, and mechanics reveal the seriousness with which you took your writing and the creditability with which you wrote. I’m sure you’ve all heard your teachers remind you to proofread, but what exactly do they mean by this? Well, they mean many things. They want you to make sure that
your paper is logically organized, correctly formatted, clearly on topic, grammatically correct, stylistically sound, and mechanically error free.

Revised text:

Grammar and Mechanics in Writing

In order for your writing to be taken seriously, concerns such as syntax, spelling and punctuation must be addressed. By maintaining a consistent high quality throughout a document, you can ensure credibility with your readers.

- Keep your paper logically organized and on topic
- Check for grammar, punctuation and other mechanical concerns
- Make sure your document is stylistically sound and correctly formatted

3. Heads Up

Headings and subheadings are convenient features on web pages because they assist online readers in looking for specific content. The web writer knows how to take advantage of web page architecture by keeping page headings and subheadings clear and engaging. Keywords make good headings since they can save time for the user looking for a specific topic and can double as links. That way, the reader can simply skip to the section that catches his or her attention.

- Use keywords to indicate headings and topics.
- The headings you use should act as road signs for the reader, letting them know where they are on the site and what they can expect from the content.
- Match all content headers with their respective links.

4. Be Direct

Much in the way that all good journalism never exceeds an eighth-grade reading level, all good web writing is direct and accessible. This doesn’t mean a web author should “dumb down” important content, but confusing or extraneous verbiage should be avoided; keep web language short and sweet. Present the strongest and most pertinent information first to maintain the reader’s attention.

- Use one main idea per paragraph.
• If the hierarchy of information is overwhelming in paragraph form, use bullets or numbered lists. As far as online content is concerned, words are there to efficiently provide information.

5. Tune In To the Tone

The attitude of a web site is an important consideration when creating online content. You wouldn’t talk to your boss the same way you’d talk to your best friend. The same concept applies to drafting online copy. The quality of the “conversation” between your copy and the reader can imply volumes about what to expect from the site. Know when to be serious, and when to be light-hearted. On the other hand, sometimes the content is less than exciting, and the only remedy is to keep the copy lively and engaging.

• Match the tone of the site and/or page with its content.

• Be flexible enough to present good copy in many different “moods.”

6. Go With The Flow

Remember that web sites are a multi-media experience, of which written content is only a part. All good sites will also feature pictures, illustrations, sounds, and sometimes animation. The job of a web writer is to work with these elements, not against them. There is a good deal of information awaiting the user in a web site. Good web copy should assist in providing direction and understanding, not make the site more difficult to get through.

III) The Audience—Understand Your Users

All good writers know how to create copy with a particular audience in mind. There are many factors for the writer to consider; tone, relevancy of information, length, and currency are among the most important. The content contained in a children’s book, for example, would be of little help in a business meeting, for a number of reasons. It is similarly valuable to consider the audience browsing a web site. In relation to audiences, there are two main types of sites, External Sites and Intranets, each of which serve different functions on the web.

1) External Sites

External sites are designed to make an impression on users with little or no prior knowledge of an organization or its affiliated institutions or corporations. Making a first impression is important; an external site is an excellent online marketing tool that allows the user to get comfortable with the organization at his or her leisure. Web designers and authors need to provide an engaging and trustworthy concept of the site that promotes
continued exploration on the user’s behalf, and presents the relevant information honestly and accurately so as to inspire return visits.

- Catch the user’s attention to promote further site exploration. An external site is a great marketing vehicle. Make use of it, whether through images, sounds, words or animation.

- Provide adequate introductory material where needed. Keep the content interesting at every turn.

- Create direct and accurate explanatory content that provides organization branding and information for the first-time visitor—let them know they can expect the same quality when browsing the site every time.

2) Intranet—Faculty, Staff, Students

Intranets are networks designed to be accessible only to members of an organization, including corporations, schools, and government facilities. Like external sites, Intranets are used to share information. One big difference between Intranet sites and external sites, however, is that Intranet usage is intended for internal access. This difference should be reflected in the content.

- Keep information current and accessible.

- Don’t be afraid to present the material in a slightly more technical manner. Remember that this content is for people with pre-existing ties to and experiences with the organization.

IV) Web Standards

As web page protocol continues to evolve, so does web content and text. Since web writing, by comparison to virtually all other forms of written media, is without a long history of general standards and best practices, it is important to remember that in order to keep the attention of users, web content must be concise, informative and engaging. This document provides some standards for high-quality web-based writing.

1) Creating Appropriate Expectations

The web author is responsible for keeping the content in line with the intention of the site. It is reasonable for the user to expect that he or she can easily and quickly retrieve useful and related information from a web site. A visitor to the Cornell Engineering site, for example, should expect to get information about Cornell University, Cornell
Engineering, details about engineering coursework, etc. Misleading, non-uniform or uninformative data, headlines or topics are poor practice in the realm of web content.

2) Fitting In/Sharing Content/Avoiding Redundancy

No web site is an island. When creating web content, it is important to consider a web site’s place in the larger online community. The Cornell Engineering site content will be most effective if it can play its part in the greater scheme of the Cornell University web experience.

To this end, the content included in the Cornell Engineering site should avoid overlap with other Cornell University department pages, thereby reducing redundancy. A good way to do this is reference other pages and URLs by cross-linking, which directs the users to locations containing shared content. For example, it would seem logical to include information concerning financial aid somewhere on the Cornell Engineering site. But a more efficient solution is simply cross-linking to a shared University financial aid page that contains the information needed. By taking advantage of the ability to cross-link and share content, web authors can streamline their workload and avoid “re-inventing the wheel” when it comes to site content.

- Create content which fits the role of the site or page.
- Avoid content overlap by cross-linking. Don’t reiterate shared content.

3) Staying Current

The quantity and quality of information available to the web author is ever-changing. Make sure to keep the content on a site fresh and up to date. Set an expiration date on copy and make update reminders. Additionally, content owners can also configure the automatic expiration of content and choose what action will be taken—warning, access denial, or redirect.

- Check the accuracy of links and content.
- Set an expiration date on copy. Create update reminders to avoid letting information or links lapse into obscurity.

4) Links

Links play a huge part in web site navigation, and one handy and stylish way to put links to good use in the content is by “chunking” information. This involves separating the content into logical and comprehensive segments, each of which might then feature categorical links designed to navigate the user to other related pages, windows or sites.
• Use language that is clear and direct, with links being added to keywords throughout the text.

• Links should only be used to enhance existing copy, not to create content. Don’t leave pages incomplete and expect visitors to link to find the rest of the content.

• Check links to other sites regularly, as many sites expire, change, or become otherwise irrelevant.

5) Lists and Images

Lists and images are an important component of content. They can provide a visual explanation of the content much more quickly than a paragraph of text. They can also sum up or compliment text so that the user can get information even faster than with sentences or paragraphs alone.

• Break up bulleted text into direct, economical content. Whenever possible, keep each bullet point under two or three sentences.

• Use images that are relevant and of a high quality, resolution, etc. Use captions under images whenever possible.

• Make sure that lists and images will comply with the design templates in the CMS (content management system).

7) Assistive Technology

It is important to make web content accessible to disabled individuals. Products and software exist to make this possible. For example, IBM’s Home Page Reader is a talking browser that understands HTML and can speak out the contents of a web page. Technologies change much too rapidly to list here; a reliable and up-to-date source of information on assistive technology is the Trace Center, online at http://trace.wisc.edu.

8) ADA Compliance/Accessibility Principles

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 requires that U.S. programs and services be accessible to individuals with disabilities. A 1996 Department of Justice ruling (http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/foia/cltr204.txt) makes it clear that ADA accessibility requirements apply to Internet resources.

As a web author, you should strive to create content that grants near-experiential parity for those individuals using technologies such as screen readers, screen magnifiers, and
others. For example, since screen readers will audibly relate all meta data sequentially to a screen reader user, it is a good idea to create headers and tags that are brief (one or two words, whenever possible) and relevant to the topics on the page. By streamlining this meta data, a visually disabled user can avoid waiting longer than necessary to learn about a page’s content.

V) Using the Content Management System

The Content Manager System is designed to let web designers and writers easily expedite new content entries for a web site. Intuitive commands and menus featured in the CMS enable authors to update and edit data as they see fit.

CMS Features that Support Web Writing Best Practices

The Cornell Engineering has purchased the CommonSpot Content Management System (CMS). The CMS is a web-based application that provides users with a simple interface for working with website structure, adding and editing content, and much more, all with no more advanced knowledge than it takes to use a word processor.

The following features of the CommonSpot CMS support the objectives of keeping content fresh, appropriate, and easily manageable:

1. **WYSIWYG editor with preview mode**—CommonSpot's WYSIWYG (What You See Is What You Get) content editor makes it easy for non-technical users to add and edit content. In addition, by previewing your work often, you can be sure that your content looks the way it should before it is published.

2. **Content expiration and reminders**—Web content does not age well. With CommonSpot, page expiration and content reminders can be set to help authors and administrators manage content freshness. Particular areas of content will need more attention in this regard than others.

3. **Link management**—CommonSpot allows users not only to check links when the website's structure is being changed (for example, when a page is moved or deleted), but to display a list of pages, templates, and images that contain links to the current page.

4. **Shared content**—Some content is relevant to more than one section of a website. CommonSpot allows content objects to be created and shared easily and within the roles defined by the permissions system. This saves having to update the same content more than once.
5. **Clean URLs**—To avoid having URLs with long strings of incomprehensible characters, CommonSpot allows pages to have more visually pleasing addresses, like http://www.paperthin.com/products/benefits.cfm.

6. **Access-based roles & privileges**—CommonSpot empowers individuals and teams through an interlocking system of roles and privileges. A content management user's view and access to the tools and functionality is determined by the individual's role. Unnecessary options are hidden from the user, greatly simplifying ease of use.

7. **Approval and workflow**—CommonSpot has a review, approval and publication process that works in conjunction with the system of roles and privileges to keep website maintenance and updates running smoothly, and to ensure validity and integrity of web content.

8. **Versioning**—CommonSpot provides version control on a page-by-page basis, allowing users to "roll back" to a previous version of a page in order to undo unwanted changes.

By taking full advantage of these and other features of the CMS, Cornell Engineering can preserve the quality and consistency of the website and its content.
VI) Resources


http://www.webreference.com/content/writing: well-organized site with some stylistic pointers for the novice web author, includes examples and other online resource links

http://www.w3c.org/WAI/: listing of ADA Compliance guidelines, with updated web accessibility reports and stories

http://trace.wisc.edu: sponsored by the University of Wisconsin, a resource for disability compliance and user accessibility

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1 Excerpted from *Don’t Make Me Think! A Common Sense Approach to Web Usability*
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VII) Technical Appendix

1) Meta data

Meta data is used by search engines as a way of indexing and locating web sites related to a user's search terms. Meta information does not appear in the body of the page; they are part of the "head" area of the HTML code. Most CMS tools will allow you to enter meta keywords and descriptions for each web page you create. These items aid search engines and directories in classifying and ranking your site according to user's keyword searches.

Meta keywords provide a list of terms that describe the content that can be found on the website. Meta keywords should be as specific as possible to the actual page content. For Cornell Engineering, good generic meta keywords would be:

<META NAME="keywords" CONTENT="engineering, cornell, duffield hall">

Meta description is just what it sounds like; it's a brief description of the web page that some search engines use when categorizing your site.

For example:

<META NAME="description" CONTENT="Cornell Engineering offers programs in agricultural, mechanical, and aerospace engineering.">

2) ADA Technical Compliance

Below is a gallery of technical quality assurance items that helps standardize your site for those with disabilities. Unfortunately, ADA compliance does not translate directly into usability. We routinely use tricks and workarounds to make a site compliant without negatively impacting design or relevancy.

1. Provide a clearly labeled link to the site’s home page. Use the ALT and TITLE attributes to clearly communicate that the link points to the site’s home page, if required.
2. Provide ALT TEXT for all images. Use alt="" for images used for design and layout purposes.
3. Make sure that all links are understandable out of context:
   1. Do not use the phrase “Click here” for textlinks or in text within image links
   2. For textlinks such as “more…” and “Find more…” use the TITLE attribute to communicate additional information about the link
   3. Images that are links, but do not include text, should have meaningful ALT TEXT that communicates the purpose of the link
4. Always spell out abbreviations at least once per page and avoid, when possible, using abbreviations that could cause problems when voiced (example: use “Pennsylvania” instead of “PA” within content)
5. Page content should linearize logically when accessed by assistive technology.
6. Provide a NOSCRIPT alternative for all content that requires scripting in order to be accessed. If a NOSCRIPT alternative is not possible, then a message to the user communicating this should be present. Ensure that pages are usable when scripts, applets, or other programmatic objects are turned off or not supported. If this is not possible, provide equivalent information on an alternative accessible page.
7. Do not rely on only color to communicate information and the colors used for the site should have sufficient contrast.
8. For data tables, use the TH tag to specify row and column headers and use the SUMMARY attribute of the TABLE tag to provide a brief summary of the data in the table.
9. Communicate to the user when a link opens a new browser window.
   1. For image links, append “(This link will open a new browser window)” to the end of the ALT or TITLE text
   2. For textlinks, use a 1x1 pixel invisible image immediately following the textlink.
10. Ensure that the site is still usable when stylesheets and images are disabled.
11. For forms:
   1. Ensure that it is possible to TAB through the form elements in the correct order.
   2. Ensure that labels are present for all form elements and that they are accurate.
   3. Ensure that all required form fields are labeled and that there is a message explaining what is used to denote a required field.
   4. Ensure that the “for” attribute is used within the LABEL tag to associate the form labels with the form controls.
   5. Ensure that an error message is associated with each required form element and that the error message is clear.
   6. Ensure that the form can be successfully completed and submitted using only a keyboard.
   7. Ensure that the form can be successfully completed and submitted if JavaScript is disabled.
   8. If it is not possible to complete or submit the form, then a message to the user communicating this should be present.
   9. Ensure that there is a confirmation message for successful and unsuccessful form submissions.
12. Identify links to PDF, Word, and other documents and include a link to download the plug-in when applicable.
13. Use tags for their intended purpose. For example, do not use BLOCKQUOTE to center text for visual purposes or H1 to increase text size.

Visit the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C http://www.w3c.org/WAI/) for a full list of ADA compliance protocols.