

How to write text for your website

1. Leave the homepage until last

When planning a new website, the common reaction is to start by thinking what will go on the homepage, then decide what goes into the next level, and so on down. A better method is to do it the other way round. Start at the bottom and work upwards. If your homepage introduces everything that is in the site, how can you decide what to put on it before you have decided what should be in your website?

Plan your pages and the sections or categories you are going to put them in, then write the pages and finally write the homepage with all the contents in mind.

2. Break up your information

If you have a website with a lot of information on very few pages, it becomes very difficult for visitors to find what they are looking for. When you are dividing up information for your website, divide pages into smaller info chunks and put them on different pages with more specific headings, your website will appear richer.

Users prefer clicking to scrolling, in other words moving laterally rather than vertically, and they want the task made easy. Breaking up information makes more work for the writer or editor, but there is not much point having lots of useful information "somewhere" in your site if the user can't find it.

3. Lead users to what they want

If users are to find what they are looking for, and not waste time reading information they are not interested in, they need to be led step by step to what they want.

For the writer, this means offering choices and not too many that make sense to the user, narrowing the range at each step, so that the user does not have to read pages that do not interest him.

Again, you the writer need to think from the bottom up, so that the user can find an easy way from the top down. Writing summaries, headlines, and links are essential website writing skills.

4. Keep the navigation simple

Users are easily confused, so make the navigation as easy as you can. This mean using terms that the user will immediately understand. One of the problems that commercial websites have is that promoting the brand names of their products conflicts with making their websites easy to navigate.

The words used for top-level links should be generic terms. They should also in many cases be the same as the terms used in other websites. "About us" might not be your first choice for a phrase to label the section describing your organization, but it is understood by everyone, which is a big advantage. If you try to be clever and use something different, you simply add to the potential confusion.

5. Anticipate questions

A website exists to answer users' questions. In the perfect website, as soon as a question arises in the user's mind there will be a link to provide the answer. We may never achieve perfection, but if our starting point is always the user's needs, we can get some way toward it. Links in the text (aka contextual links) are helpful to users and they should be carefully written to match the main navigation. As far as possible, they should use the same words as the links in the menus. Even small variations can raise a doubt in the user's mind and that doubt may mean the end of the visit.

For example, if the link in the menu is "Register," does the link in the text that says "fill in our registration form" lead to the same page? Using the same words for both links gives users confidence that they know where they are going.

6. Make it look easy

Your text should look easy to read. However well you write, if you present your readers with a slab of continuous text, you will put them off.

Text should be divided into paragraphs of two or three sentences with white space around them. Informative subheadings should be written above your paragraphs to enable a user who is scanning the page to see a list of contents. Columns should be wide enough for the shape of phrases and sentences to be clear, but not so wide as to force the eyes to travel more than half way across the screen to find the beginning of the next line.

Text should be in a readable font and in a colour that contrasts strongly with the background. Users should be able to alter the size of the font on their computers to suit their own needs.

7. Put your best bits first

On the Web, writers need to be more like journalists than academics or novelists. Given that users are impatient, and have many other options if your website doesn't give them what they want, you should put your most important information at the top, where users are likely to look first. This is often referred to as the "inverted pyramid" style of writing, in contrast to academic writing, which conventionally put the conclusion at the end and was described as a pyramid. Journalists put the latest and most important information first and then go on to give detail, background information, and explanation. If Web writers do the same, users can decide straight away whether a page is what they are interested in and not waste time reading to the end to find out.

8. Use more verbs

The Web requires concise writing because users don't want to waste time. As a general rule, choosing a verb rather than a noun to convey your idea produces a more concise sentence. Rather than using the noun "investigation," as in "carry out an investigation," why not just "investigate"? Nouns often require linking phrases, such as "in terms of" or "with regard to" that make your sentences verbose.

The Web requires dynamic writing because users are active. Much of what you write on a website is aimed at offering the user choices of action, so your words need to embody that dynamism, as in "Find out," "Read about," "Buy online," and so on.

9. Consistent styling

If users of websites are easily confused, writers can help them by using words as consistently as possible. There are many reasons for having a style guide: identity, ethics, professionalism, but nearly all involve consistency.

Consistency is perhaps even more important on a website than in print, because users move quickly from one page to another in no particular order. They are easily thrown by inconsistencies in terminology, spelling, and presentation.

It's not a good idea to draw up a style guide from scratch: You may never finish the job!

Several respected media organizations publish their style guides. Choose one of them and adapt it to your needs, adding style points of your own as questions arise or inconsistencies are spotted.

10. Write for search engines and searchers

Writing for the Web is about writing both for users and for searchers. I start from the assumption that it is in the interest of search engines to produce accurate and informative results, which should mean that technical sleight of hand that brings no benefit to users will not work in the long run. So writing for searchers means using words and phrases they are likely to enter into a search engine to find your site.

This is more likely to work if each page has distinctive content that is reflected in the title of the page (<title> in HTML), the <description> in the metadata, and to a lesser extent the key words and phrases, <keywords>, in the metadata.

Your links, which tend to attract the attention of search engines, should be informative rather than mechanical for example avoid "click here", and if possible text links should contain important words and phrases.