

How to Write for the Web – A Guide

By Jim Witkins 11/30/2006

Research* shows that Web users don't read Web pages. They scan them!

If you care about the success of your Website, you should write in a style useful to your audience.

DO

- **Keep it short** - use half the word count (or less) compared to conventional writing
- **Use bulleted lists** – this increases scanability
- **Use meaningful subheads** - skip the marketing speak. Use keywords to help visitors find relevant information
- **Highlight keywords** - hypertext links serve as one form of highlighting; typeface variations and color are others
- **Use one idea per paragraph** - if visitors are not caught by the first few words in a paragraph, they will skip over any additional ideas contained within
- **Use the Inverted Pyramid style** – start with the conclusion
- **Use common language** - speak the audience's language. Use words or phrases your audience will understand. Keep it simple.
- **Write to be found** - use words your audience will be searching for in search engines. If they can't find it, it doesn't exist

DON'T

- **Write long paragraphs** – you'll be the only one reading them
- **Use marketing speak and jargon** – it's confusing, distracting, and won't get you noticed in the search engines
- **Repurpose content from other sources without editing for the Web** – Writing for the Web means writing for the Web, not cutting and pasting to the Web
- **Bury important information in pdf's or other documents** – it's less likely to be found in search engines or site searches. (Provide a detailed summary with a link to the document if nothing else)
- **Use the phrase “click here”** – hypertext links should be descriptive phrases identifying the expected content. This helps visitors quickly identify content that meets their needs and improves search findability and ranking

Style Guidelines:

UW Communications General Style Guide

http://www.uc.wisc.edu/styleguide/search.php?searchcode_id=1

http://www.uc.wisc.edu/styleguide/search.php?searchcode_id=2 (Internet terms only)

*More resources:

How Users Read on the Web - by Jakob Nielsen, 1997

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

Inverted Pyramids in Cyberspace - Jakob Nielsen, 1996

<http://www.useit.com/alertbox/9606.html>

Use Old Words When Writing for Findability - Jakob Nielsen, 2006

<http://www.useit.com/alertbox/search-keywords.html>

F-Shaped Pattern For Reading Web Content - Jakob Nielsen, 2006

http://www.useit.com/alertbox/reading_pattern.html

Web Writing for Many Interest Levels - by Nathan Wallace, 1999

<http://www.e-gineer.com/v1/articles/web-writing-for-many-interest-levels.htm>

Lower-Literacy Users - Jakob Nielsen, 2005

<http://www.useit.com/alertbox/20050314.html>