Mastering the Challenges of Web Writing

How to deliver a stronger message and achieve greater impact on your audience
Introduction

Suppliers and manufacturers know their Web site and e-mail communications are a primary source of information for customers and prospects. Engineering, technical and industrial professionals spend many work hours online gathering information, sourcing components and comparing and communicating with suppliers.

Page design, navigation and search engine optimization get a lot of attention on your Web site. E-mails and e-newsletters are designed to get through spam filters. Still, the most important way to communicate on the Web is through the words and writing style you choose.

Writing for the Web is a critical skill. It’s not the same as other types of writing such as print media, speeches or press releases. Users approach the Web differently than they do other media, and you must write differently to capture and hold their attention — as well as to get your message across and serve their needs. In addition, with the Web, you must accommodate the needs of varying audiences that are markedly different from each other.

If you manage a Web site, write for online or edit and/or review Web communications, this white paper will help you produce excellent Web writing that will engage your readers, deliver your message and produce the results you expect.
The Challenges of Writing for the Web

How is writing for the Web different from other types of writing? There are three characteristics of Web writing that make it a distinctive — and challenging — skill to master.

1.) You are writing for multiple audiences

Yes, you could say the same thing about writing your corporate brochure: you’re writing for prospects, customers, partners and investors. Multiple audiences.

Still, the Web is different. On your Web site, one of your audiences isn’t even human. It’s search engine spiders, those software programs roaming the Web looking for keyword relevant pages to index in its database. Keyword density, word count on a page, meta tags, the words you use in links and other factors are meaningful to search engines. And with e-mail, you’re writing to get past spam filters. You don’t face these challenges when writing for print media.

Here’s another audience challenge: The human resources director in the office down the hall, the technical support manager and the CFO all have a stake in what your Web site says and how it is said.

Because your Web site is much more than a corporate brochure and can expand almost indefinitely, you will have a number of internal constituents clamoring to get their message on the Web site.

Add to this mix your main audience of customers and prospects and you can see conflicts arising.

What’s ideal writing for search engines may not be good for customers and prospects. What the executive wants — perhaps a long, jargon-heavy company pitch on the home page — may not be helping anybody.

2.) You must capture your audience’s attention quickly

Upon landing on a Web page or opening an e-mail, the majority of users quickly scan the page to determine if it contains information relevant to their needs. They will look only for a few seconds before making a decision whether to stay and read on or to abandon the site, or delete the e-mail.

Web writers must learn to capture their audience’s attention quickly, with a compelling and relevant headline, for example. Or an easy to read list. Or a key benefit-oriented sentence.

You need to write copy that users can quickly scan. Secondary headlines, offers and action-oriented commands, for example, can help users scan efficiently. Without such scanning language to anchor users to your page, they will leave quickly— and never find your beautifully written prose in the third paragraph.
3.) *Users scan and jump around*

Books are written and designed to be read front to back, beginning to end, and so are articles in magazines. Printed brochures permit jumping around, but readers don’t get lost: the pages are still in sequential order.

On the Web, users will scan and click, jumping from page to page following what interests them. This can cause a user to get lost on your site, especially given the fact that no two Web sites are alike. Each one has a different architecture in terms of navigation and how content is arranged.

Highlighting navigation elements helps orient the user. But the writer is responsible for coming up with clear language on navigation and other links, along with page headlines, to make sure users understand where they are on your Web site and where to go next.
How to Excel at Web Writing

Now that we’ve established Web writing as unique and challenging, what must you do to deliver an excellent product?

Excellent Web writing is the result of mastering four types of tactics: page, chunking, style and formatting. Each of these is discussed below.

Page Tactics

Page tactics are your overall writing approach to a specific Web page. The best advice we can give is to write single topic pages. Treat every Web page as if it were the page a visitor lands on when coming to your Web site. In reality, users coming from search engines often do land somewhere deep inside your site, and not on the home page.

If you write with page tactics in mind, you will accomplish two things:

- Your page will have strong headlines and copy that uses keywords relevant to that page
- You will stay focused on the topic and the reason that visitors were looking for you in the first place

Page tactics help visitors realize they have come to the right place and will motivate them to stick around. If your topic is complex or has many sub-topics associated with it, write descriptive navigation links that lead readers to subsequent pages.

For example, if your single topic landing page is about Lasers, you might provide navigation or text links to sub-pages about specific types of lasers, such as Helium Cadmium Lasers or Helium Neon Lasers.

Chunking Tactics

Chunking is a way of writing that presents information in small, easy-to-read segments. Chunking is especially important in Web writing because users scan, looking for content of interest. Typically, chunking has the following characteristics:

- Descriptive headlines
- Multiple sub-headlines on a page or in an e-mail
- Primary content and secondary content separated but appearing on the same page
- Short paragraphs of 3-5 lines, with each paragraph separated by some white space
- Use of bulleted and numbered lists, with each item typically fitting on one or two lines

Compare a Web page that uses chunking with one containing long, dense paragraphs of prose and see which one you are willing to explore and read. The answer is obvious. A page that uses good chunking is approachable. A
The Web page above follows important chunking principles, using short paragraphs, bold text and white space to chunk pieces of information, separating primary from secondary content and getting all important information near the top of the screen. Compare that to the lower page which uses dense blocks of text and lacks chunking tactics to make the page easier to read.
How will content look online?

Most of the time, content written for the Web is written offline first — in a word processing program, for instance, or taken from a brochure. You may not know how it will look online until it’s published to your Web site.

You could end up in a situation where the paragraphs look denser or longer than you expected. Or the copy isn’t as visually appealing as you had expected it to be. Or information you thought was “above the fold” is actually below it. “Above the fold” is a newspaper industry term that applies to the top half of a folded newspaper. In Web page terms, this means what the user can see without having to scroll down the page.

For these and other reasons, it’s always advisable to publish first to a test Web site or a page not yet available for public viewing. Then you can make additional edits or adjustments to the copy so that it appears as you want it to online.

Depending on how your organization publishes content to the Web, you may have to go back to your original document to make changes, or you may be able to make them directly online before making the page live.

Style Tactics

Style is a combination of the tone and words you use to convey your message and achieve an effect on your audience. There are many types of writing styles, both informal and formal.

Many of the style tactics listed below apply not just to Web writing, but all types of writing. Yet they are particularly important on the Web, where users often compare the content and message on your Web site to your competitors.

Style tactics include:

Be honest — Show respect for your readers by being honest and truthful in your writing. Don’t exaggerate or hype what you have to say. Most readers will spot fakery right away and ignore your email or leave your Web site.

Get to the point — One of the most common mistakes is writing “around” the point you want to make. Know what your main point is and state it right away. Avoid extra words and sentences that don’t support your main point. Cut out unnecessary fluff.

Be straightforward — Even if you are writing about complex subject matter, you should do so in a simple way so you don’t confuse readers. Choose simple words over complicated words, small words over big words. For example, choose ‘use’ instead of ‘utilize.’

Be conversational — Many writers assume they must follow a professional, lofty style in business-to-business writing to prove their company’s competence. This is not true. Don’t think of B2B writing as one company communicating with another. Think of it as one human communicating with another. Write like you speak, in a more conversational tone. Readers will appreciate it.
Avoid jargon — This is another style tactic that has to do with word choice. Jargon actually has two meanings. The first applies to the technical and specialized language of a trade or profession. The use of specialized language is appropriate because it explains your specific industry, business, products and services.

It’s the other kind of jargon you must avoid — overused, nonsensical, meaningless words. The list is a long one and you can see these words on many Web sites: empower, seamless, leverage, value-added, synergize, scalable, optimize and so on. Strike these words from copywriting.

There’s a great tool called ‘Bullfighter’ that can help you strip jargon from your writing. It’s a free download that works inside Microsoft Word or PowerPoint. You can download it here: http://www.fightthebull.com.

Keep sentences short — This one is simple. Shorter sentences are easier to read and understand than longer sentences. Here’s a good rule of thumb: if your sentence is three lines or longer, you might be trying to pack too much into it. Look for ways to split it into multiple sentences. Or look for unnecessary words to cut.

Use keywords — Keywords that apply to your products and services should appear in page headlines, sub-headlines and links to other pages. If you are writing single topic pages, keywords for those topics are a natural fit and help visitors know they have come to the right page. For example, if you are writing Web pages about centrifugal water pumps, two of your page headlines might be:

- Uses of Centrifugal Water Pumps
- How Centrifugal Water Pumps Work

Links are also a good place to use keywords. Some writers take the quick and easy way out and use nondescript language such as ‘click here’ or ‘more info’ when writing links. A better way to write a link would be, for example, ‘properties of diode lasers’. Or add commands and actions to links: ‘discover five uses of diode lasers’. In these cases, you use a relevant keyword and you tell users what they will find on the other side of the link.

Formatting Tactics

Formatting refers to font, font style, font size and the spacing between lines and paragraphs (the spacing is called leading). Formatting decisions largely determine how easy or hard copy is to read.

Some of the formatting decisions belong to the writer; others are based on the design of your Web site or e-mail. Still others depend on the user’s settings. Because various Web browsers may render text differently, and users have controls in their browser to change text size and to zoom in and out of pages, it’s best to choose just a few font choices and text styles and keep your Web pages simple. The same goes for e-mail programs.
You may have to work with your Web master to test how your text looks in different Web browsers and e-mail programs.

The main points to keep in mind about formatting are these:

- Use Web-friendly fonts that all browsers support, such as Arial, Helvetica, Times New Roman and Verdana
- Make headlines larger and bolder than page copy
- Set off blocks of copy with sub-headlines
- Make your font at least 9-point in size

Also, avoid all capital letters, underlining, lots of colors, centering text, excessive use of bold – anything that makes text hard to read. For example:

- Don't underline unless it links
- Don't use blue unless it links
- AVOID ALL CAPS BECAUSE IT’S HARD TO READ AND MAKES IT SEEM LIKE YOU ARE SHOUTING AT YOUR READER
- Be a responsible user of bold text. The purpose of bold text is to stand apart and draw attention. If you bold too much, nothing stands apart and you just create a lot of noise.
- Don't mix a lot of styles, colors, fonts. Your copy will look silly and be hard to READ.
- Centered text is hard to read if it spans more than one line. This is because readers always want to return to the left to begin the next line and become disoriented if the left margin changes in longer blocks of text. (Small text is hard to read too)

**Use the Inverted Pyramid Style of Writing**

Journalists are taught the inverted pyramid style of writing. This means the most important information appears at the beginning of their story, with secondary and supporting information following in a hierarchy of decreasing importance.

The obvious reason for the inverted pyramid style is that busy readers want the main facts of a story up front and will continue to read the article if their interest level is high and time permits. Another reason is that stories appearing in print often must be edited to fit in a limited space. It isn't uncommon to cut off the tail end of the story, where less important information appears.

When you apply the inverted pyramid style of writing to Web pages, you provide readers with the most important and compelling information first. If you've captured their attention, they will continue to read on. Fortunately, with Web pages, you seldom have to edit for space restrictions.
Additional Rules Specifically for Writing E-Mails

In many ways, writing e-mails is like writing for the Web. The same rules apply. The first thing people do when they get an e-mail is scan it. The subject line and headline are critical.

The single-topic approach for writing Web pages applies to e-mails as well. Unless you are sending a general e-newsletter that touches on a number of subjects, e-mails should deliver a focused, strong message with a single call to action, such as downloading a white paper or registering for a seminar. If you put multiple topics and offers in a single e-mail, each one will be diluted and have less impact.

E-Mail Headlines and Subject Lines

The e-mail headline is especially important because many people use a preview pane in their e-mail program. A preview pane splits the window of the e-mail program in two, allowing a user to see the top content of an e-mail in the preview pane, without having to open the e-mail. People who use a preview pane might see only the subject line and headline of your e-mail. They will make their decision whether to continue reading or not based on those two elements.

Subject line and headlines work together to deliver a strong, cohesive message. Here are some writing tips to make headlines and subject powerful:

- Promise a benefit
- Solve a problem the user faces
- Make a relevant offer
- Be time sensitive in nature
- Be specific
- Say something new

Here are examples of strong subject lines and headlines:

- New RF tool accurately predicts signal loss (promises a benefit)
- Just-published CAD drawings now available (something new)
- Top ten reasons why hydraulic pumps fail (specific)
- Three seats left for tomorrow’s Webinar (time sensitive)

For more advice on this topic, read “How to Write Better E-Mail Subject Lines” in GlobalSpec’s Marketing Maven e-newsletter.
http://www.globalspec.com/MediaKit/Sept06MMaven_Subject.html

Write E-Mails to Avoid Spam Filters

One challenge you must overcome is getting your legitimate business e-mails past spam filters set up by Internet Service Providers (ISPs), corporations and individual users.
Tactics to succeed at this include properly identifying yourself to your audience, developing relationships with ISPs, adhering to spam laws and removing bad addresses from your list.

Writers also play an important role in getting past spam filters. Here is what a writer can do to help legitimate e-mails reach their recipients:

- Avoid using words that spam filters tend to catch, e.g.: free, guaranteed, credit card, act now, among others
- Don’t use ALL CAPS, excessive punctuation (such as multiple exclamation points) or symbols such as asterisks and dollar signs
- Review your copy with spam-checking software before sending; a number of free or low-cost packages are available, such as SpamCheck (http://spamcheck.sitesell.com/) or SpamAssassin (http://spamassassin.apache.org/)

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<tr>
<th>Do's and Don't of Web Writing</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Do</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Write short sentences and paragraphs</td>
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<td>Use bulleted and numbered lists</td>
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<tr>
<td>Make your copy relevant primarily to your prospects and customers</td>
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<td>Use keywords in headlines and body copy</td>
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<td>Use a conversational style; write like you talk</td>
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<td>Use descriptive language and keywords in text links</td>
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Remember, whether you’re writing for your Web site, or writing e-mails, the most important thing is to provide your readers with relevant, targeted information, presented in an easy-to-read style. If you do this, they will keep reading.
About GlobalSpec

GlobalSpec is the leading specialized vertical search, information services and e-publishing company serving the engineering, manufacturing and related scientific and technical market segments.

The company provides users with engineering and technical search engines, a broad range of proprietary and aggregated Web content and over 55 product-centric e-newsletters that help engineers and related professionals perform their jobs accurately and productively.

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