

These notes are based on our own reading and experience in designing for the web. They are by no means comprehensive, but will help you to think about how to write effectively for online reading.

writing for the web: an overview

Writing for the web needs to be approached differently to writing for a printed medium. The constraints imposed by having to read on-screen and navigate between windows means both the content and the structure of your writing has to be reconsidered.

There are three main points to bear in mind:

- 1 keep it short: avoid unnecessary detail and get your information across clearly;
- 2 make your text easy to scan through: avoid long continuous blocks of text; and
- 3 use hypertext links to split up information into multiple pages.

audience

Who will look at the web site? What is its purpose? Bear these questions in mind as they will influence what you write and how you write it.

structure and navigation

You can read the pages of a website in any order you choose. The layout of a website is like a tree, with pages branching off in different directions depending on which link you click.

When you write you need to think first about the structure of your text:

- :: Start with the general information and progress to the detail.
- :: You can plan general or introductory pages that link to more detailed information on separate pages.
- :: Think about what information logically follows what. Each page should start with a short summary so that users can tell what is on the page even if they don't read all of it.
- :: You can put long and detailed background information in separate pages; similarly, you can make information that is of interest to a minority of readers available through a link so other readers don't have to wade through it.

If you have to segment a long linear story into multiple pages using links, split the information into coherent chunks that focus on a certain topic.

Linking to new pages adds interest and the reader is less likely to become bored or miss information than if they have to scroll through paragraph after paragraph of text. In terms of navigation, it is also easier to find the information you are looking for.

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content and appearance: clumping text

Reading text on screen is trying on the eyes and it can be difficult to read large chunks of text without losing your place. Research suggests that reading on screen is about 25% slower than reading from paper. As a result, people don't want to read large quantities of text from computer screens and what they do read needs to be easy on the eye.

Users tend not to read streams of text fully. Instead, they scan text and pick out key words, sentences, and paragraphs of interest while skipping over those parts of the text they care less about.

For these reasons it is important to break up long text flows. This make them easier to follow and also easier for the user to select items of interest without missing important information. You can do this by using

- :: short paragraphs separated by space
- :: headings and subheadings
- :: bulleted lists
- :: emphasising key words or points (eg using bold or coloured text)
- :: hyperlinks to avoid the need for scrolling.

language: clear and simple

Because reading text on screen is more difficult than reading printed text, you need to convey your information as clearly and concisely as possible.

- :: Don't use five words where one would do and try to avoid using long, complex sentences.
- :: Do not use footnotes or endnotes; these could force the reader to scroll up and down a page. Say what you need to in one place.
- :: Use contents lists, headings and subheadings that are meaningful; can you tell what a page is about from its heading? This will make it easier for users to decide what pages or parts of pages they want to read, without having to read through everything.