

WRITING FOR THE WEB



Lynn Villeneuve

lynn@astrolabewebsites.ca

Adopting a specialized writing style for the web is important for reasons such as readability, search engine optimization and accessibility. Fortunately, there is a great deal in overlap in the strategies for writing for these factors. A tactic that improves readability of text on the web may also improve accessibility or make your web pages more search engine friendly. This guide offers some practical suggestions for crafting your articles and text for website publication and outlines editorial styles.

Astrolabe Websites and eSolutions

www.astrolabewebsites.ca

RR1,

Burnstown ON K0J 1G0

613.432.9669

3/28/2012

Contents

Writing for the Web	3
Introduction.....	3
People read differently on the Web	3
Writing style for the Web	3
Writing the content for your website	4
Recommended text styles	5
Links	5
Page titles (as appear at the top of browser windows).....	5
International date format.....	6
Use of keywords	6
Meta description.....	6
Glossary definitions	6
Graphics	7
Writing for Search Engine Optimization (SEO).....	7
Content is king	7
Keywords rule.....	7
Writing for accessibility.....	8

Writing for the Web

Introduction

Adopting a specialized writing style for the web is important for several reasons.

1. People read differently on the Web
2. How you write or use words can increase or decrease accessibility for people with disabilities
3. The words you use and where you use them can influence how well search engines find your website.

Fortunately, there is a great deal in overlap in the strategies for writing for the above factors. A tactic that improves readability of text on the web may also improve accessibility or make your web pages more search engine friendly.

This guide offers some practical suggestions for crafting your articles and text for website publication as well as outlines editorial styles for the web.

People read differently on the Web

The **web is not linear**. People may enter a site from any page other than the home page and roam from page to page in no particular order. Web pages need to be more independent than print pages for this reason. **Each page must stand alone, even if it follows from or relates to another page**. This means that you may need to briefly repeat information found on another page if it's relevant to the reader's understanding of the content on the current page (much like a synopsis of the previous week's show provides context for a new episode of a TV drama or soap opera).

People tend to **skim web pages** rather than read them word-by-word. As a result, a writing genre characterized by clear, concise text in short segments with ample editorial landmarks (titles, headings, etc.) has developed specifically for the web. Even methodical readers benefit when you accommodate online reading patterns!

Writing style for the Web

Write to empower not to impress. Aim for a style that is credible and accurate but not overtly scholarly.

- Use an informal, friendly tone that doesn't compromise clarity or correctness.
- **A unique voice is okay**; it can differentiate your site. Be engaging but not annoying
- Write in the **first person**.
- Use **active verbs**.
- Do not use slang, jargon, made-up or buzz words. Think globally and avoid colloquialisms and metaphors that may only make sense in the context of our language and culture or in a limited geographic area.
- Short words are best. Old, familiar, short words are better.
- Take the time to define terms and provide background.

- When using a brand name, supplement the brand name with a generic equivalent.

At all times, maintain a **high editorial standard**.

Writing the content for your website

Write as simply and clearly as possible. Be frugal with text. Make sure it has value to the reader. Concise text is always better but you should not “dumb down” your writing.

People don’t read web pages they scan or skim. The more scannable your content is, the better.

- **Prioritize the information on each page with the main point at the top of the page** and all other important information ‘**above the fold**’. On the Web, this means above the place where you have to start scrolling down to see additional content.
- **The inverted pyramid style** — conclusion at the beginning of a text and important facts near the top — used in journalism works well on the web.
 - Important information comes first
 - It is more likely to be seen and remembered
 - This allows efficient scanning for information
 - Initial key details establish a context for the secondary information
 - At the top of a page, keywords and facts carry more weight with search engines.
- If it makes sense, break your page content into **manageable, logical comprehensive segments**, placing each segment on a different page if appropriate and connect the pages via links.
- During a quick scan, **elements such as [headings](#), lists and typographical emphasis on important words** will catch the user’s attention and highlight sections effectively.
- One idea per paragraph is best. Long paragraphs will benefit by using more sub-headings and other typographical emphasis. Don’t use the first paragraph of each page to tell users what they’ll find on the page. Just start immediately with the information.

Use descriptive headings and sub-headings (H1, H2, H3, and H4 - as found in Microsoft Word)

- Use the headings and sub-heads in the hierarchy of the page content to represent the relationship between:
 - Article/page headline
 - Subsection headlines
 - Sections within subsections
- Headings and sub-heads should be accurate and descriptive

Recommended text styles

Headline style: Bold, capitalize first letters of words

- Document titles
- References to other websites
- Titles of documents mentioned in the text
- Proper names, product names, trade names

Down style: bold, capitalize first word only

- Subheads
- References to other sections within the website
- Figure titles
- Lists

Links

Use thoughtful hypertext links to reinforce your message, not to distract the reader. Most links should point to resources within the site. Should you send the reader elsewhere, the link should make it clear that the reader will be leaving for another domain.

- Website conventions indicate that underlined text represents a link so **only links on a webpage should be underlined**. Underlining other text can lead to misunderstandings. Do not include terminal punctuation in a link.

The key to good hypertext linking is to maintain context so that the reader stays within the narrative flow.

- To minimize the disruptive quality of links manage their placement on the page.
 - Place only the most salient links within the body of the text.
 - Group all illustrative, parenthetical, footnote or minor links at the bottom of the document.
- **Never construct a sentence around a link phrase such as “Click here for more information”**. Links should be as specific as possible so that when someone clicks a link it’s very clear what he or she will find there. Write the sentence as you normally would and place the link on several words or a phrase that best describe the additional content you are linking to (i.e. where the website user will be going and why).

Poor: Click here for more information.

Better: Learn more about bird feeding.

Page titles (as appear at the top of browser windows)

Each web page should have a customized title relating to the pertinent theme on that page. A page title has several functions beyond providing a clue about the nature of the content on that page so it’s important to make your page titles as meaningful as possible.

1. The page title is the first thing users with slow Internet connections will see (**yes, there are still slow Internet connections!**). The page title may determine if the user will wait long enough to view the downloaded page
2. It becomes the text in bookmarks or favourites that users create. It will remind the user about what's on the page — what he or she found to be of interest.
3. Page titles are important for search engine optimization. Search engines regard page titles as the primary description of page content. A good descriptive page title using well-chosen keywords increases the chance that a page will appear as the result of a related search query.

Page titles should:

1. Incorporate the name of the organization or website
2. Form a concise plainly-worded reminder of the page contents
3. Have a **maximum of 90 characters**.

International date format

When inserting dates into text, use the international date format: day/month/year

Use of keywords

- **Keywords**

Make a list of keywords that you think someone would use in a search engine to find material on the topic you are writing about.

- Incorporate these keywords into the page title, headline(s) and body text. Provide this list to the web developer for inputting into the page “code” as **Meta keywords**. Generally key phrases with two or three words work better than single words. Use some of each. Separate keywords or key phrases by commas.
- Position keywords at the beginning of sentences and headings.

[Learn more detailed information about keywords and their role in search engine optimization.](#)

Meta description

A Meta description is a **short concise summary of the content of a web page that is placed in the HTML code of each web page**. It appears on search engine results pages and may be the deciding factor in whether a user visits the page. Keep it brief, informative and interesting enough to tempt website users to go to the page. Aim for 25 to 30 words including keywords and or key phrases. Provide this list to the web developer for inputting into the page “code”.

Glossary definitions

You may have included words/terms within the text for which there should be a definition placed in the website's glossary. Each writer should provide a list of those terms with an original definition (i.e. not plagiarized) or properly annotated definition for each.

Graphics

Use images judiciously to enhance content. Make certain that each photo, illustration or other type of graphic serves a clear purpose and makes a contribution to the page content and the site.

1. Suggest a selection of several images to illustrate written content if appropriate. For each, include the following:
 - a. The **source** of the image (where the image can be found)
 - b. **Copyright/credit information**
 - c. An appropriate **caption**
 - d. A short **alternate text (commonly referred to as alt text)**. This is a brief description of the image or illustration that is placed in the webpage code and is an important aspect of accessibility, especially for blind or low vision people who use assistive devices such as screen readers.

Writing for Search Engine Optimization (SEO)

Susan Ward of About.com's Small Business: Canada puts search engine optimization in very simple terms. According to Susan, search engine optimization is the "art and science of making web pages attractive to the search engines." SEO is all about placement (ranking) in search engine results. Since 2000, the Internet has grown rapidly. Estimates vary, but some sources indicate that Google may index over 20 billion web pages. As a result SEO has also grown exponentially and has become an industry in itself. SEO is not necessarily difficult but it does involve acquiring specific knowledge and being willing to spend time working on SEO on a regular basis. Short of hiring SEO specialists, which may prove expensive, there are many strategies and actions you can take on your own to improve the ranking of your website. In this document, I refer only to those actions relating to how the written word can be used in website content and code to make your site more search engine friendly.

Content is king

Search engines don't rank websites. They rank the popularity of individual pages and the relevance of content. The first step in achieving good search engine results is providing good, relevant content and links within pages.

Each page of your website needs to be optimized for search and must be well linked to other pages within your website. Inbound links from other sites, especially popular websites, are crucial. You may wish to develop a strategy for obtaining such links. It's also not enough to write and upload your website content once. You need to update existing content and provide new content on an ongoing basis.

Keywords rule

Before you start writing content for a new website or revising content on an existing website, you need to develop a list of keywords that you know or think that people use to search for your website. Keywords may be a single word or a phrase. Specific keywords are usually better than general ones. For example "dentists in Ottawa" may be better than "dentists." Singular and plural forms of a word represent different keywords — for

example dentist and dentists. If you are using an analytics program, such as [Google Analytics](#), you will be able to track the keywords used by searching for your website. In addition, Google also offers a tool that will show you what keywords have been used on similar websites or topic areas.

- [Google Keyword Tool](#)

Once you have your keywords, how you use them is important. In descending order of hierarchy, use your keywords as follow on each page.

1. In the page title of each page (located in the HTML code)
2. In major headings in the content of each page (coded as h1, h2, h3, h4 and similar to the heading available in Microsoft Word). H1 carries more weight than h2 which carries more weight than h3, etc.
3. In the first several paragraphs of text on a web page and, where possible, in the beginning of sentences.
4. In the text of links to other pages in the website.
5. In the Alt text (or alternative text) for images, illustrations, charts, etc. used on a webpage. Alt text is a short description of what is in each image or graphic and is placed in the code of web pages.
6. In the HTML file name for each page and directory (folder or sub-folder) of a website. It's "best practice" to use hyphens to separate words within a file name. For example, growing-roses-in-Canada.html is better than growingrosesincanada.html or growing_roses_in_canada.html.
7. In organized Meta tags, particularly the [Meta keywords tag](#) and the [Meta description tag](#) which go in the coding of web pages.

Writing for accessibility

Accessibility means "making allowances for the characteristics a person cannot change at all or change easily". While most people will never know the differences between accessible and non accessible websites, disabled users with such disabilities as follow will:

- Low vision
- Blindness
- Colourblindness
- Limited or no hand function
- Cognitive disabilities
- Poor eye/hand coordination (often experienced by older people)

In Ontario, the [Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act](#) now requires that all communication with clients be accessible. It requires that content on websites also be accessible. As with search engine optimization, there are many strategies for making websites accessible. This document only deals with the ways words and text may be written to improve accessibility. Most of the following suggestions have appeared previously in this document since they also serve to improve readability and searchability.

- Provide your website developer with 'alt' text for all graphic images on each page
- Provide a long description for graphic elements as needed and for all audio and video content. A long description is detailed information about the content of an image or about audio or video content or, for that matter, about any content that may be inaccessible to people with disabilities that is usually provided on a separate page.
- Provide written text for a title attribute for various elements on web pages and ensure that your website developer uses it in the website code. A title attribute is a snippet of HTML code that provides additional information about elements on a web page (for example on images, links, etc.). When the title attribute is used, the text used will appear as a tool tip as users mouse over an element and will be read by screen readers.
- Use text-based navigation as opposed to images for navigation (i.e. buttons)
- Underline links (colourblind people who cannot see the change in colours as they mouse over a link, will benefit from links that are underlined)
- Provide as much context as possible in your writing, especially in links and lists.
 - Not: In the list below
 - But: In the list of eight items below