Online Writing

Writing Techniques for Email, E-newsletters, Intranets and the Web

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Best-practice online writing

Rationale

- It is far easier to inform or persuade your readers if you understand who they are, what they want and what they already know. It follows that it's sensible to spend time researching your readers' identities and needs before you try writing for them.

- Online reading is slower than reading from printed sources. Online readers are thus more annoyed by long-winded writing than are other readers.

- If an initial, quick scan does not reveal useful information, many readers will stop reading. It is thus very important that we design our online documents so that readers can discover 'the good bits' quickly.

- Much online information is of poor quality. It is thus important for us to establish our credibility when we write.

- A helpful FAQ can be of great benefit to your readers. It can also significantly reduce the time and money you spend dealing with customers' questions.

- A well written About us page can bring new users up to speed quickly and easily.

Objectives

You will be able to complete these tasks:

- Explain why it is necessary and important to research your readers' identities and needs.

- Identify sources of information about your readers.

- Edit documents for brevity.

- Explain when it's appropriate to use PDF files and when it isn't.

- Make your online content scannable through the use of headings, summaries, bulleted lists and other techniques.

- Explain the need for establishing credibility online and list techniques for obtaining it.

- Explain how to create a helpful FAQ or series of FAQs.

- Explain what should be found in a well written About us page.

Don't be afraid to use 'we' and 'our'

Most of the content on your web or intranet site is probably written on behalf of your organisation rather than on behalf of an individual. Some organisations adopt a rather corporate tone in such material:

>**XYZ HealthCo** recognises that care is achieved through …

>… and **the agency** is part of a broad community.

>**The Department of XYZ** could not fulfil **its** role without …

>See the publications section for a copy.

You may feel that this style seems distant and impersonal. An alternative approach is to create a warmer, more personal tone by sometimes using the pronouns 'we' and 'our':

>**We** recognise that care is achieved through …

>… and **we** are part of a broad community.

>**We** could not fulfil **our** role without …

>See **our** publications section for a copy.

Small changes like these can make your site more inviting for your audience.

Address the readers as 'you' or 'your'

Another way to adopt a warm, personal style online is to address the reader as *you* or *your*. Compare these impersonal examples:

>If more information is required …

>The agency will reply to correspondence within 48 hours.

These may sound more personal if rewritten as follows:

>If **you** require more information …

>**We** will reply to **your** correspondence within 48 hours.

🗣 Discussion

- Does your site frequently use *we*, *our* and *you*, or a more corporate style?

- If not, why do you do things that way? Is it just the way it's always been done?

Figure 1.3:   An up-front summary allows readers to quickly determine the con-
tent and relevance of the page.

Similarly, we can summarise the contents of a long piece of email or an online newsletter by including a simple table of contents at the start. For example:

```
-----------------------------------------------------------------
       THE BETTER WRITING SKILLS NEWSLETTER, September 2013

              By Tim North of Scribe Consulting

                     www.scribe.com.au
-----------------------------------------------------------------

Welcome to the Better Writing Skills newsletter.

IN THIS ISSUE

    1. How should we capitalise lower-case trademarks?

    2. "Sooner" or "earlier"? "Less" or "fewer"?

    3. Should we use "i.e." and "e.g."?

    4. Just for fun

Your comments and questions are always welcome. Just send email
to:

    info@scribe.com.au

Cheers,
Tim North
-----------------------------------------------------------------
```

Figure 1.4:   A long email or newsletter can benefit from a table of contents or
some other form of up-front summary.

1.6   Credibility

Why is credibility so important online?

In earlier decades, it was cynically observed that freedom of the press was available to any-one — if they owned a press. With the increasing scope and availability of the Internet, the situation has changed radically. Now anyone with Internet access (a much cheaper proposi-tion) can, with some effort and skill (but not much money), make themselves heard by an audience of millions.

Back in the 1960s, media-culture guru Marshall McLuhan coined the phrase 'the global vil-lage' to describe how new telecommunications technologies were (in effect) making the world a single village in which anyone could conveniently talk to anyone else. The Internet has made this even truer today.

The downside, though, is that even the global village idiot has a voice. ☺

Much online information is of poor quality: it's neither clear, concise nor accurate. *It is thus important for us to establish our credibility when we write.*

Spelling, punctuation and grammar

Simply writing competently will set you apart from a great deal of what passes for infor-mation on the Internet. Proper spelling, punctuation, grammar and formatting will go a (distressingly) long way to setting you apart from the herd.

A few tips:

- Ensure that you use a spelling checker on everything you write.
- Ensure that your spelling checker is set to the correct version of English: Australian, Brit-ish, Canadian or US.
- Checking your own work for errors is unreliable. Choose a 'spelling buddy' and check each other's work.

Also, take the advice of Microsoft Word's grammar checker with a grain of salt. It's good at picking up certain errors (like repeated words), but some of its advice is just plain wrong.

Even in a recent version of Word (Word 2010), the grammar checker misses some spectacu-larly obvious errors; for example:

> *Microsoft the company should big improve Word grammar check.*
>
> Sandeep Krishnamurthy, faculty.washington.edu/sandeep/check/

Turning usability into return on investment

Rationale

- Management may have a hard time understanding the monetary benefits of time spent improving the quality of online writing.

- It is thus important to understand how improved usability can yield a measureable return.

Objectives

You will be able to complete these tasks:

- Explain some of the ways in which poor usability can lessen returns.

- Explain how non-profit organisations or government agencies with no commercial activities can still expect to increase the productivity of some of their other goals.

2.3   Usability affects sales

A web site that tries to sell goods and services to consumers (B2C) or to other businesses (B2B) has many opportunities to lose a sale due to poor usability:

- A poorly designed home page may be sufficiently off-putting to discourage some customers from wanting to deal with the organisation.

- If the 'About us' pages provide little or no information to demonstrate that the organisation is trustworthy, customers may be unwilling to provide credit-card information.

- Overly complex 'shopping carts' or user-registration mechanisms may frustrate customers into leaving. (Being asked by a web site to provide your email address before you can proceed is something that many users find particularly galling. Many user will leave the site or provide an invalid address.)

- Bureaucratic, technical or legalistic language may alienate customers.

- Poor web site designs may confuse customers and prevent them from easily finding and buying the goods and services they desire.

These are just some of the ways that poor usability can limit commercial success. Conversely, good usability must thus be able to boost commercial returns.

🗣 Discussion

- In what other ways can poor usability influence sales performance?

- Does your workplace engage in online sales? If so, what type of goods and services does it provide?

2.4   Usability and return on investment

In studies conducted in 2002 and 2008,[19] Jakob Nielsen analysed the return on investment of dozens of web site redesigns and found the following improvements:

Table 2.2:   Measures of return-on-investment (ROI) from web site redesigns

Metric	Avg. Improvement
Sales / conversion rate	100%
Traffic / visitor count	150%
User performance / productivity	161%
Use of specific (target) features	202%

[19]   www.useit.com/alertbox/20030107.html and http://www.useit.com/alertbox/roi.html

Rationale

- Reading text from a screen is harder than reading it in print, so we need to pay attention to the clarity and formatting of our email.

- People get a lot of email, much of it junk, so your email has to get their attention quickly; that is, it has to be *scannable*.

- Email can be annoying if misused or overused. In such environments, it becomes less effective.

- The unnecessary use of HTML-formatted email can lessen the number of people who receive or read your messages.

- Innocent mistakes can see your email blocked by spam filters.

Objectives

You will be able to:

- Employ techniques that encourage people to reply to your emails.

- Format your email in ways that maximise clarity and thus increase the likelihood that your message will be read, understood and acted upon.

- Use descriptive codes in the subject line to categorise your outgoing messages.

- Describe techniques that can help to minimise the time spent dealing with email.

- Explain when (and why) it may be better to avoid email in favour of the phone or face-to-face communication.

- Explain when and why it may be better to avoid the use of HTML-formatted email.

- Word your email in such a way that it is not mistaken for spam by mindless spam filters.

3. Show that you've done your homework

For more than ten years now, I've been publishing the *Better Writing Skills* monthly newsletter.[25] In it, I encourage people to write in with questions. I'm continually shocked by how many people write in with questions that could be answered with a minute or less of Googling. I do answer these questions, but they're a lower priority than more interesting, challenging questions.

Psychologist Bernard Weiner conducted research that found that people are more willing to help people who have demonstrated that they have tried to help themselves. He wrote:[26]

> *Explicitly state what you've done to get answers or [to] help yourself.*

🗣 Discussion

- How motivated are you to help someone who asks you a question that you feel they could have easily answered themselves?

- How motivated will they feel if *you* do it? ☺

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4. Highlight *un*common commonalities

People feel a greater affinity with (and are more likely to help) people with whom they have something in common. This is so effective that salespeople often seek out (or invent) similarities with their customers; for example, 'Hey, I'm from there too!' or 'Yeah, I went to the same school'.

Research[27] shows that such claims (whether true or not) *do* influence us. A 1994 study put fundraisers in a university campus. When the fund raisers added the line 'I'm a student too' to their sales spiel, their receipts more than *doubled*.

Grant adds that the effect is even stronger when the writer highlights something unusual that we have in common:

> *When I cold-emailed Zappos.com CEO Tony Hsieh, my first instinct was to mention that we attended the same college. After realizing that thousands of people share that connection with him, I looked for uncommon commonalities. I ended up writing that I first learned about him when my college roommate followed in his footsteps to run the Quincy Grille [a student-run restaurant at Harvard].*

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[25] www.scribe.com.au/newsletter.html

[26] goo.gl/Q4etn

[27] Cialdini, Robert B. 2008, *Yes! 50 Scientifically Proven Ways to be Persuasive*, pp. 124–6.

Effective e-newsletters

Rationale

- People visit your web or intranet site when they *want* something, but e-newsletters can build on-going *relationships* with customers and staff.

- If aimed at an overly broad audience, email newsletters can fail to be relevant. It is thus generally necessary to target them at a specific audience.

- E-newsletters can drive readers to your intranet or public web site.

Objectives

You will be able to complete these tasks:

- Create e-newsletters that help to build an ongoing social relationship with your intended audience.

- Create e-newsletters that provide content that users have indicated that they find interesting and/or useful.

- Use your e-newsletter to drive readers to your intranet or public web site.

4.1   E-newsletters build relationships

E-newsletters solve a different problem

People visit your web or intranet site when they want something: information, advice, a contact number, etc. This isn't a social interaction; it's strictly functional. Electronic newsletters (e-newsletters), on the other hand, produce a more emotional response from users. They can be the basis of developing and nurturing an on-going relationship with them.

> Newsletters feel personal because they arrive in users' inbox[es], and users have an ongoing relationship with them. In contrast, users tend to glance at websites when they need to accomplish something or to find the answer to a specific question. Newsletters also have a social aspect, as users often forward them to colleagues and friends.
>
> ... they can create much more of a bond between users and company than a website can.
>
> <div align="right">Nielsen Norman Group[33]</div>

> Email newsletters are the best way to maintain customer relationships on the Internet.
>
> <div align="right">Jakob Nielsen[34]</div>

> The newsletter is the perfect website companion because it *answers a different user need*: newsletters keep customers informed and in touch with the company; [whereas,] websites give customers detailed information and let them perform business transactions.
>
> ... If you don't have a newsletter, then publishing one is probably the single-highest [return on investment] action you can take to improve your Internet presence. If you do have a newsletter, then improving it according to research findings will likely make it several times more valuable to your organization. (Most of the newsletters we've tested failed to meet users' expressed desire for good communication.)
>
> Newsletters have one more benefit: they are the primary way to liberate your site from dependence on search engines. In the long run, achieving this liberation is one of the most important strategic challenges facing Internet managers.
>
> <div align="right">Jakob Nielsen[35]</div>

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[33]   www.nngroup.com/reports/newsletters/summary.html

[34]   www.useit.com/alertbox/newsletters.html

[35]   www.useit.com/alertbox/roi.html

Rationale

- Inconsistency can seem unprofessional.

- Incorrect information detracts from your credibility.

- Outdated information can be misleading and inconvenient for users. It also further detracts from your credibility.

- Online content raises issues relating to areas such as privacy, intellectual property, implied endorsements and defamation.

Objectives

You will be able to complete these tasks:

- Identify those content elements that can be used to achieve a stylistic consistency throughout your online presence.

- Describe the link between correctness and credibility.

- Describe the importance of keeping online content up to date.

- Identify a range of legal issues that relate to online content.

5.3   Currency

> **Current**: 1. a. Belonging to the present time … b. Being in progress now …
>
> www.dictionary.com

Consider this scenario: You've written lots of online content. You've taken into account everything you've learned in this course. It's scannable, concise, clear, well structured, credible and a dozen other great things. Three months pass, six. Some of the material now needs to be reviewed and perhaps updated. Questions:

- Who's going to do the reviewing and updating?

- How often will it be done? Regularly or when someone gets around to it?

- Has management allocated time for someone to do reviewing and updating, or is it an afterthought?

Many organisations approached the advent of their new web site with great enthusiasm. They're excited; they're passionate; they're optimistic. It usually lasts about a month. ☺

It's human nature to be excited and enthusiastic about something when it's new, but this often declines as the novelty fades. This can apply to entire web sites or to individual articles. You might have put your heart and soul into that last writing project, but *x* months from now, it will probably need some updating.

- Whose job is it to keep existing content up to date?

- Is it the original author's job? If so, are authors given a time allotment for updating old content?

- What if the original author has moved on? Does the article just sit there getting older and staler? (And perhaps damaging your site's credibility.)

- Can such jobs be delegated to technical staff?

A good content management system can help to solve some of these problems.

🗣 Discussion

- Have any of the pages on your intranet or web site been unchanged for more than a year? Two years?

- Do you have a means for keeping track of when material should be updated?

- Do you have a means for keeping track of who is responsible for doing it?

- Do you retire old pages, or do they hang around forever?

Bad design can ruin good words 6

Rationale

- If the design of your site renders it hard to read or confusing to navigate, your writing has been wasted as your audience will avoid the site.

- It is thus important that you can identify possible design problems in your site and explain the issues to your design team.

Objectives

After completing this chapter, you'll be able to:

- Identify a range of common design problems that can reduce the usability and popularity of your web or intranet sites.

- Communicate to your design team the need to resolve these issues.

6.3   Font sizes that are too small

Poorly chosen fonts or font sizes lead to frustration for users:

> *Bad fonts won the vote by a landslide, getting almost twice as many votes as the #2 mistake. About two-thirds of the voters complained about* **small font sizes** *or* **frozen font sizes***; …*
>
> www.useit.com/alertbox/designmistakes.html

> *16 pixels for body copy. Anything less is a costly mistake.*
>
> http://goo.gl/MYO8K

In print, it is common to use a font size of 10 to 12 points. (This paragraph, for example, uses 10-point text.[40]) Many designers thus use the same range of values on web and intranet sites.

Unfortunately, this doesn't take into account that printed documents are usually held close to the face for reading. Computer monitors, though, are often at greater than an arm's length. *The net effect is that font sizes need to be larger for online work than for print:* 16 points is a good size for online text. This is illustrated clearly in the figure below:
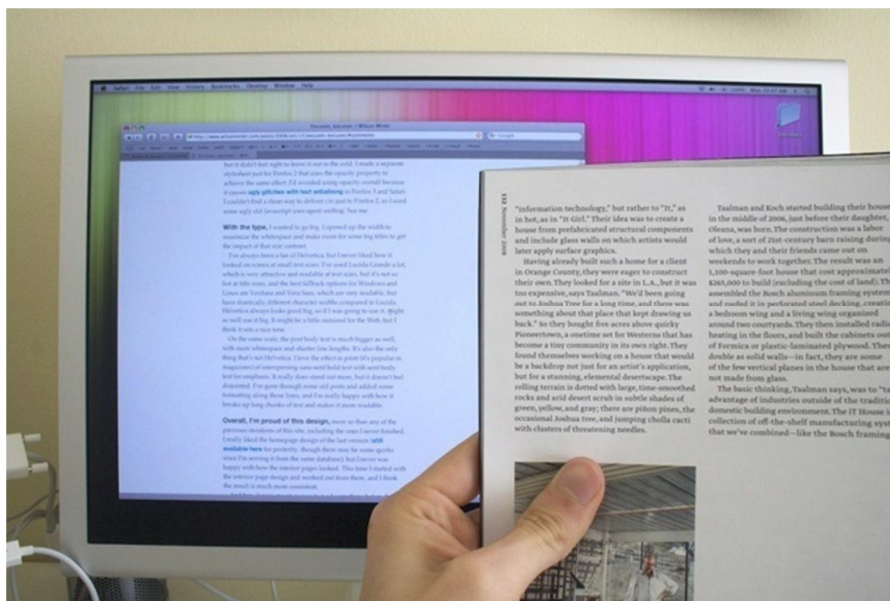

Figure 6.2:   The printed material uses an 11-point font size. The monitor, being further away, needs to use a 16-point font size for the text to appear the same size. (Photo ©2008, Wilson Miner. Used with permission.)

You may wish to point your designers to the following very helpful articles. They discuss this matter in greater depth:

www.wilsonminer.com/posts/2008/oct/20/relative-readability/

informationarchitects.jp/100e2r/

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[40]   The text in this manual is set in Adobe's highly readable free fonts *Source Sans Pro* and *Source Sans Pro Semibold.* You can get both here: http://goo.gl/ARGP0. [adobe.com]

6.5   The role of PDF files

Introduction

Adobe's portable document format (PDF) is a widely used format for allowing documents to be shared among computer users, regardless of the type of computer being used or the presence of specific fonts. Documents can be saved in PDF format using Adobe's *Acrobat* software (a commercial product). Existing PDF documents can be viewed and printed using the free *Adobe Reader* software.[41]

Nielsen has argued against presenting online information to users as PDF files:[42]

> Users get lost inside PDF files, which are typically big, linear text blobs that are optimized for print and unpleasant to read and navigate online. PDF is good for printing, but that's it. Don't use it for online presentation.

On the other hand, organisations often have large amounts of information in PDF format that they'd like to share with users. It's not always realistic to undertake the work necessary to translate this into multiple, short, easily navigable web pages.

When is it okay to use PDF files?

When should we use PDF files?

- Use PDF if the user needs to print the entire document and read it offline.

- Use PDF if the material requires specific fonts that might not be available in users' web browsers. (Fonts with technical symbols or foreign characters spring to mind.)

- Use PDF to distribute fax-back forms that the user will print out and fax.

- Use PDF to distribute forms that must be signed and mailed back.

- Use PDF to distribute secure, password-protected documents.

- Use PDF if you simply don't have the time to convert the document into multiple pages of web content. (This isn't ideal of course, but sometimes we have to be pragmatic.)

🗣 Discussion

What other considerations might lead you to publish content in PDF files?

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[41]   www.adobe.com/products/acrobat/readstep2.html. The product was previously called *Acrobat Reader.*

[42]   www.useit.com/alertbox/20030714.html

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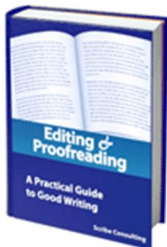
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