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Writing web Content

Web writing is totally different to writing for printed matter. We tend to scan content on the web hunting for the information we're after, as opposed to reading word-for-word. As a result of this, there are certain guidelines you should be sure to follow when writing copy for your website:

1. Use clear and simple language

Reading from computer screens is tiring for the eyes¹ and about 25% slower than reading from printed matter. As such, the easier the style of writing the easier it is for site visitors to absorb your words of wisdom.

Some **techniques** for using clear and simple language include:

- Avoid slang or jargon - Get your grandmother and ten year old nephew to read your site - if both can understand the page content you've done well!
- Use shorter words where possible - 'Begin' rather than 'commence', 'used to' rather than 'accustomed to' etc.
- Avoid complex sentence structures - Try to include just one idea or concept per sentence
- Use active ahead of passive words - 'We won the award' is shorter and easier to comprehend than, 'The award was won by us'

2. Limit each paragraph to one idea

If you assign just one idea to each paragraph site visitors can:

- Easily scan through each paragraph
- Get the general gist of what the paragraph is about
- Then move on to the next paragraph

All this and **without fear that they'll be skipping over important information**, because they will already know roughly what the paragraph is about.

Limiting each paragraph to just one idea is especially effective when combined with front-loading paragraph content.

3. Front-load content

Front-loading content means **putting the conclusion first**, followed by the what, how, where, when and why. The first line of each paragraph should contain the conclusion for that paragraph, so site visitors can:

- Quickly scan through the opening sentence
- Instantly understand what the paragraph is about
- Decide if they want to read the rest of the paragraph or not

Because each paragraph contains just one idea, users can do all this safe in the knowledge that if they jump to the next paragraph they won't be missing any new concepts.

Front-loading also **applies to web pages**, as well as paragraphs. The opening paragraph on every page should always contain the conclusion of that page. This way, site visitors can instantly gain an understanding of what the page is about and decide whether they want to read the page or not.

Unfortunately many websites don't adhere to this guideline and end up writing page content in a story-format. On each page there's an introduction, middle and conclusion, in that order. Unfortunately, when scanning through web content we don't tend to read all the text nor read all the way to the bottom of the screen. As such, you may easily miss the conclusion if it's left until the end.

So remember, conclusion first, everything else second! For a **great example of front-loaded content**, just read any newspaper article. The opening paragraph is always the conclusion of the article.

4. Use descriptive sub-headings

Breaking up text with descriptive sub-headings allows site visitors to easily **see what each section of the page is about**. The main heading on the page provides a brief overall view of what the page is about, and the opening paragraph gives a brief conclusion of the page (because you've front-loaded the page content). Within the page though, there are various sub-themes which can be quickly put across with sub-headings.

There's no hard and fast rule for **how frequently to use sub-headings**, but you should probably be roughly aiming for one sub-heading every two to four paragraphs. More importantly though, the sub-headings should group on-page content into logical groups, to allow site visitors to easily access the information that they're after.

5. Bolden important words

Another way to help users locate information quickly and easily is to bolden important words in some paragraphs. When site visitors scan through the screen this text stands out to them, so do make sure the text makes sense out of context.

Bolden two to three words which **describe the main point of the paragraph**, and not words on which you're placing emphasis. By seeing these boldened words site visitors can instantly gain an understanding of what the paragraph is about and decide whether or not they want to read it.

6. Use descriptive link text

In the same way that bold text **stands out to screen-scanning web users**, so does link text. Link text such as 'click here' makes no sense whatsoever out of context so is useless to site visitors scanning web pages. To find out the destination of the link, site visitors have to hunt through the text both before and after the link text.

7. Use lists

Lists are preferable to long paragraphs because they:

- Allow users to read the information vertically rather than horizontally
- Are easier to scan
- Are less intimidating
- Are usually more succinct

8. Left-align text

Left-aligned text is easier to read than justified text, which in turn is easier to read than centre- or right-aligned text.

When reading through justified text the spacing between each word is different so our eyes have to search for the next word. This slows down our reading speed. Right- and centre-aligned paragraphs slow down reading speed even more because each time you finish reading one line your eye has to search for the beginning of the next line.

Conclusion

These eight guidelines are nothing revolutionary nor are they difficult to implement. Yet so many websites structure their content so poorly to the detriment of their site visitors. Have a quick look over your website now - how does it do with regards to these content guidelines?