Writing for the Web

Purpose

This handout provides techniques for web writing. Whether you are writing a blog, or developing a web page, the strategies, techniques, and tips below help you adhere to the genre's conventions.

Useful Strategies

Know your readers/audience: As with most writing genres, knowing your audience is essential. Be aware of whom your readers are, for what they are looking, and what their behavioural pattern online looks like—consider your site's analytics.

Know your task and your users' needs: As you write, keep your purpose at the forefront of your process—and text. Attend to the reasons for which your users are reading your page, and consider what it is you are providing to them. You can explicitly articulate your purpose early in your piece.

Structure and Formatting

The structure of a web piece helps your readers follow seamlessly; more importantly, a solid structure is helpful for users who will be skimming the article/page for information. Your content should be scannable and not crowded. Users need to find important information quickly and efficiently, so paragraphs should be small and visually recognizable.

As you format, avoid highlighting content unnecessarily. Adhere to the four basic design principles: Contrast, Repetition, Alignment, and Proximity.

Make sure that your work includes:

- Introduction
- Keywords
- Headings
- Sub-headings
- Lists

Writing Style

When writing for the web, follow the "Inverted Pyramid" approach, where you present the most important information first. In doing so, you ensure that your readers will not leave the page before getting the important messages. As you develop the piece, make sure that your writing style is:

- Accessible—avoid abbreviations and jargons, and use simple words
- Active—avoid the passive voice
- Concise—avoid redundancy and unnecessary qualifiers

- Skim-friendly—avoid dense or long sentences; focus on one idea per paragraph

Links

Linking your content is one of the many benefits of writing for the web. As you do so, make sure that your links are semantically meaningful and integrate them as part of your text. The links should be actionable; ideally, they would include an imperative verb and invite action from the reader. When linking your content, make sure to link to the original source—as opposed to a secondary source—so that your users do not have to go looking for the reference. This approach reflects credibility and ensures ease of access (in addition to enhancing search engine optimization).

Revision and Editing

As you finalize your online piece, proofread it a few times to ensure it is free of typos and grammatical errors—for credibility purposes among others. In addition, make sure to edit your work for concision and clarity. Ask yourself whether your sentences are necessary for the message you are conveying, and whether or not they are as clear as can be. Consider stepping away from the piece before publishing, then coming back to edit/revise with fresh eyes. Once published, consider updating and revising the content as necessary.

Resources

For more details and specifics as to writing for the web, see the following:

- Government of Canada's Writing for the Web and Digital Communications resources
- Seattle U's "Writing for the Web" concise guidelines
- University of Maryland's "Best Practices for Web Writing"
- University of Waterloo's "writing for the Web Tips"
- The extensive *Web Style Guide*