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Writing for the Web

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Outline

- Print Design vs. Web Design
- Three Main Guidelines
- Writing for the Web
- Questions



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Print Design vs. Web Design

- People read differently online
 - More difficult to read on a screen
 - Tiring for the eyes
 - Reading rate is about 25% slower than paper

Scanning vs. reading

Headings and subheadings first

Scan for hyperlinks, lists and keywords

Moving around is what the Web is all about



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Print Design vs. Web Design

- People read differently online

More difficult to read on a screen

➤ Scanning vs. reading

- We're usually in a hurry
- We're usually only interested in a fraction of what is on a page
- We tend to focus on words and phrases that seem to match the task at hand or our own personal interests

Headings and subheadings first

Scan for hyperlinks, lists and keywords

Moving around is what the Web is all about



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Print Design vs. Web Design

- People read differently online
 - More difficult to read on a screen
 - Scanning vs. reading
 - Headings and subheadings first
 - We use these as sign-posts in the information to determine if we are going in the right direction
 - Scan for hyperlinks, lists and keywords
 - Moving around is what the Web is all about



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Print Design vs. Web Design

- People read differently online
 - More difficult to read on a screen
 - Scanning vs. reading
 - Headings and subheadings first
 - Scan for hyperlinks, lists and keywords
 - Further clues as to the value of the content to our task at hand or interest
- Moving around is what the Web is all about



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Print Design vs. Web Design

- People read differently online
 - More difficult to read on a screen
 - Scanning vs. reading
 - Headings and subheadings first
 - Scan for hyperlinks, lists and keywords
- Moving around is what the Web is all about
 - Users will jump around, scroll and click away from your information
 - Users will land on your page by jumping around or through a search engine.
 - Make every page independent – explain its topic without assumptions about the previous page



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Three Main Guidelines

1. Be Succinct
2. Write for Scannability
3. Use Links to Your Readers Advantage



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Writing for the Web

- Shorter is better
- Write for the reader, not your ego
- Question your modifiers
- Be Direct
- Use headings that work
- Use subheadings liberally
- Page chunk
- Keep sentences short and simple
- Create meaningful links
- Watch your formatting
- Edit, edit, edit



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Writing for the Web

➤ Shorter is better

- Rarely should an article be longer than 1000 words (aim for 600-700)

“If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.” – George Orwell\

- Example:

Before:

“Washington, Jan. 6 – One thing is already clear about how President-elect George W. Bush intends to govern the nation: state and local officials will have far more leeway to shape and operate the full range of federal social, regulatory, and public works programs.”

After:

“Washington, Jan. 6 – One thing is clear about how George W. Bush intends to govern: state and local officials will have more leeway to shape and operate federal social, regulatory, and public works programs.”

- A 23% decrease without affecting content.



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Writing for the Web

- **Write for the reader, not your ego**
 - Think of your readers as busy, impatient people. Be concise. Don't be cute.



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- **Question your modifiers**
 - Avoid overuse of adjectives and adverbs

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➤ **Be direct**

- Users are usually looking for information – make it easy to find
- Use straightforward headings
- Begin with the shortest and clearest statement you can make about your topic
- Use key words about your topic (particularly at the beginning)



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➤ Use headings that work

- Good one makes it easier to find your article – and more likely to read it
- Bad one ensures that few will find it at all - and unlikely to read it
- Short and direct, not indirect and cute
- Use keywords – to enable search engines and for scanning
- Use powerful language: “Ad Agencies Cut Jobs”
not “Layoffs announced by some agencies”



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➤ **Use subheadings liberally**

- Every few paragraphs
- Provide a visual road-sign that something interesting is coming up
- Use them liberally – readers look at smaller amounts of copy on the screen
- Reader should never scroll more than a screen and a half without seeing one



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➤ Page chunk

- Make text short
- Split the information into multiple nodes linked together (this is not a continuous story just broken into pages, rather it is information split into coherent chunks that each focus on a certain topic)
- Long background information can be relegated to linked secondary pages
- Same with related information



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- **Keep sentences short and simple**
 - Long sentences will often seem forbidding on the screen
 - Can distract readers from primary goal of finding information
 - Intent is to communicate as quickly and efficiently as possible (particularly for news and business writing)



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➤ **Create meaningful links**

- Make links descriptive so they are understood out of context
- Good links become meaningful signposts for scanning
- Good links guide the reader through the most relevant supporting information
- Bad links are meaningless for Screen-readers - may read only the links on a page
- Bad links provide no information for search engines



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➤ Create meaningful links

BAD: "For information on XYZ [click here](#)."

GOOD:

[Information on XYZ](#).

or:

Paragraph with some text about [a subject](#).



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➤ **Watch your formatting**

- Avoid over-bolding
- Do not underline for emphasis – underlining is seen as a link
- Avoid italicized text – difficult to read on screen
- Avoid CAPS – slow down character recognition and therefore reading speed
- Bulleted and numbered lists slow down the scanning eye – use them if you want to draw attention to important points
- Limit the number of items in a list to no more than nine
- Limit lists to no more than two levels



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➤ **Edit, edit, edit**

- Is this clear?
- Is there a simpler way to say this?
- Is there a shorter way to say this?
- Is this necessary?



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References

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