

Web Writing Tips

When developing content for your Web site, you can include important information from paper documents (newsletters, Report articles, news releases, articles in the Alumni Magazine, etc.) published within the past year, but you must “repurpose” this content first to make it easy to read on the Web.

Web visitors simply do not read Web pages like they do paper documents; this fact has been confirmed by many usability studies. In a recent study, John Morkes and Jakob Nielsen found that 79 percent of Web visitors always scanned any new page they came to; only 16 percent read word-for-word. In addition, reading from computer screens is 25 percent slower than from the paper page. Web writers must acknowledge these facts and write for a new kind of audience: those who don't read, but scan text instead.

This does not mean text is not important. Another recent study by Nielsen found: “People ignore graphics in the first three ‘eye fixations’ they make on a Web page. Eight times out of ten they look for text – headlines, summaries, and captions.” Major headings, titles, brief summaries, etc. should all give the visitor a very broad overview of the page's topic.

To Repurpose Content for the Web:

- Use simple sentence structures (convoluted writing and complex words are hard to understand).
- Instead of presenting textual content in a long paragraph, use short “chunks” that have only one main point. Chunks are small manageable units of information (1-7 pieces of relevant and related information) that fill the screen with 100 words or less (in 2-3 paragraphs).
- Start a Web page with the conclusion or most important information first, as well as a short summary of the remaining contents, instead of leading up to the main point (as is typical in a paragraph).
- Keep information “above the scroll” (i.e., one screen in length) if possible. Many visitors will not scroll down to read all of the information.
- Avoid promotional writing style with subjective claims (“hottest ever”). This type of writing imposes a cognitive burden on visitors who don't want to spend their time filtering out the promotional language to get to the facts.
- Do not call attention to the Web by using phrases like: “click here,” “follow this link,” and “this Web site.” This is especially helpful for individuals who must use screen readers to “view” a Web page, because “click here” conveys no meaning to them.
- Cut out any “nice-to-know” information. Instead, consider using graphics to get the point across, if possible.
- Use meaningful headers to label short chunks of information and to convey to the visitor the main point of the information presented in the chunk. Headers that are emphasized in some way (bold, larger type, etc.) make it easier for the visitor to find information.
- Bold type, used sparingly, is the best format for textual emphasis on the Web. Color, typeface variations, and hypertext links also serve as other forms of emphasis.
 - Emphasize only key information-carrying words and avoid highlighting entire sentences or long phrases because visitors can only pick up two (or at most three) words at a time when they scan a page.
 - Emphasize words that differentiate the Web page from other pages.

- Each emphasized word should be clear on its own and when a visitor reads the emphasized words in a sequence he or she should understand logically the page's main ideas.
 - Avoid italic type, if possible, because it does not display well on computer monitors.
 - Avoid capitalizing entire words for emphasis because this increases reading time and puts excessive strain on the eyes.
 - Do not underline text for emphasis, underlining should be reserved for links.
- Use sans serif text (e.g., Arial) for information presented on the Web. Use serif fonts sparingly.
- Emphasize minor textual points to make them stand out and make sure they are useful even without the surrounding text.
 - Consider presenting minor points in a list format (bullets or numerical) to further chunk this extra information. Lists draw in the scanning eye.
 - Use numbered lists when the order of entries is important and unnumbered lists when the sequence of the entries is not important.
 - Place no more than seven to nine items in a list (this includes a list of links, such as in a navigation menu).
 - Limit lists to two levels: primary and secondary.
- Include a standard footer for every Web page containing contact information (mailing address, e-mail address, telephone number and fax number) and copyright information (if needed).
- Some, but not most, Web visitors will want to read extra information on a topic and the Web is the perfect place for delivering detailed information, but only on a third or fourth level page (or PDF document, etc.). The links to this more detailed information should be embedded in the relevant textual sections of the concise second/third level pages.
- Avoid using dates whenever possible. If you must use a specific date, remember to update the content on that page once the date has passed.

Example of content from a print document

Institutional Web Support Services (IWSS)

IWSS is here to help you with your college, department, or unit Web site. IWSS not only maintains the University's Web site, www.ilstu.edu, we also independently consult with developers who need assistance with a site. Our goal is to help you help yourself with Web site development. IWSS offers a wide range of services, including lists of Web site guidelines and standards and help with site design, graphics, navigation solutions, copyediting, technical coding (HTML, Java, etc.), database applications, electronic forms, and the Illinois State iGuide. IWSS encourages you to include the iGuide navigation bar and University identifier on your University Web site. The iGuide will simplify navigation throughout the University's Web site and will enhance access to your site. Available in a variety of colors and styles, and easy to place on any Web page, the iGuide's use on campus is growing. Contact IWSS to learn more about the iGuide.

Please use the IWSS site and page design checklists as self-help tools in building or assessing your site throughout the Web development process. These checklists can be obtained by calling IWSS. You can learn more about how IWSS developed at Illinois State University and find contact information for our office and each of the IWSS team members by visiting the About Us section of our Web site (<http://www.iwss.ilstu.edu/>). At this site you can also find out how IWSS has helped developers with their Web sites by consulting on such issues as: graphic design, database applications, electronic forms, etc. If you have any questions or comments, please contact IWSS via e-mail or call us at 309-438-8835

Example of the same material that has been repurposed for the Web

Welcome to Institutional Web Support Services (IWSS)

We are here to help you with your college, department, or unit Web site. IWSS not only maintains the University's Web site, www.ilstu.edu, we also independently consult with developers who need assistance with a site. Our goal is to help you help yourself with Web site development.

Services

IWSS offers a wide range of services, including lists of Web site guidelines and standards and help with site design, graphics, navigation solutions, copyediting, technical coding (HTML, Java, etc.), database applications, electronic forms, and the Illinois State iGuide.

iGuide

We encourage you to include the iGuide navigation bar and University identifier on your University Web site. The iGuide will simplify navigation throughout the University's Web site and will enhance access to your site. Available in a variety of colors and styles, and easy to place on any Web page, the iGuide's use on campus is growing.

Checklists

Use the IWSS site and page design checklists as self-help tools in building or assessing your site throughout the Web development process.

About Us

Learn more about how IWSS developed at Illinois State University and find contact information for our office and each of the IWSS team members.

Outcomes

Find out how IWSS has helped developers with their Web sites by consulting on such issues as: graphic design, database applications, electronic forms, etc.

If you have any questions or comments, please contact IWSS via e-mail or call us at 309-438-8835.