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The Principles of Writing for the Web

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PART I—INTRODUCTION

Great Web content would likely garner nothing better than a “C” from your high school English teacher.

Conversely, most of what you were taught in school about “good” writing makes for unsuitable Web content.

Herein lies one of the great difficulties business owners face when crafting online content:

The principles of effective *online communication* fly in the face of what we know about effective print communication.

Writing for the Web is a process distinct from writing for print because each medium’s audience uses content differently.

Web users are typically interested in

- solving a problem (*How do I make authentic Orange Chicken?*),
- finding the answer to a question (*Who was the 24th President?*), or
- fulfilling a need (*I need to find a local tailor*).



Daniel Quinn is a freelance writer and editor. He specializes in communications for the financial services industry

Our services include:

- ~ **Web content & client communications**
- ~ **Website search engine optimization**
- ~ **Quarterly/monthly newsletters & reports**
- ~ **White papers & pitch books for lead generation & marketing**
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Offline readers linger over the prose, looking for

- enrichment and details;
- colorful descriptions of people, places, & things
- specific details about events.

Studies show Web users generally have little interest in reading long, paragraph-oriented prose.

Rather, Web users

1. SKIM

They quickly browse (not read) Web pages for information they require.

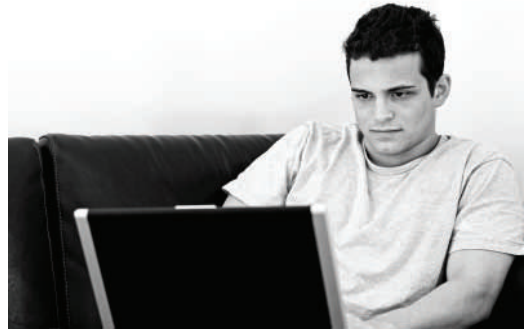
2. SNATCH

Users zero in on and grab the items they are looking for, largely ignoring everything else.

3. SKATE

Then, they are gone. An April 2008 study by Web usability expert Jakob Nielsen study showed people spent, on average, **less than a minute** on any given Web page.

Contrast such behavior with that of a typical person reading a newspaper, novel, or magazine. Because your Web audience has an agenda distinct from users of print products, it makes no sense to approach writing for the Web and for print in the same manner.



Re-conceptualize what constitutes “good” writing, with a Web audience in mind.

The goal is to build a “click-worthy” online presence.

Optimizing web content will help your audience cut through the noise and get to the information they need.

PART II—THE FOUR GUIDELINES

GUIDELINE #1: LOSE THE EGO

Bad content does not mean you are a bad writer. Some people are great academic writers, others are poets. Some excel at short stories, others at sweeping novels, copy writing, or corporate communications.

F. Scott Fitzgerald was a failed screenwriter, yet nobody argues he was a poor writer. Rather, his talents in one arena were ill-suited to another. It is as simple as that.

The lesson to take away from this rule is to not let ego get in the way of revising or rewriting Website content. It's not an indictment of one's writing skills - it's just good business.

GUIDELINE #2: HALF AS LONG

Because Web users SKIM, SNATCH, & SKATE, they have little interest in digging through long paragraphs to search for the answers to their questions. **Web content should be 50% as long as its offline counterpart.**



GUIDELINE #3: FORMATTING IS YOUR FRIEND

Boldface, headers, sub headers, and bulleted lists help the audience quickly navigate the page.

Paragraphs should be no more than 3-4 sentences.

GUIDELINE #4 SPEAK PLAINLY

Even when the Website is targeted exclusively for a highly specialized audience (pension fund managers or institutional investors, for example), avoid using jargon.

You must account for the reading abilities of the average Web user.

PART III—SUPPORTING RESEARCH

The average American reads at an 8th grade level, and according to Web usability expert Jakob Nielsen, **30% of web users have low literacy levels**. As Web use continues to spread, that number is expected to grow to **40%** in coming years.*

Nielsen's eye-tracking studies have shown that Web readers scan pages in an F-pattern, which suggests that the first two paragraphs are extremely important.*

(*http://www.useit.com/alertbox/reading_pattern.html)

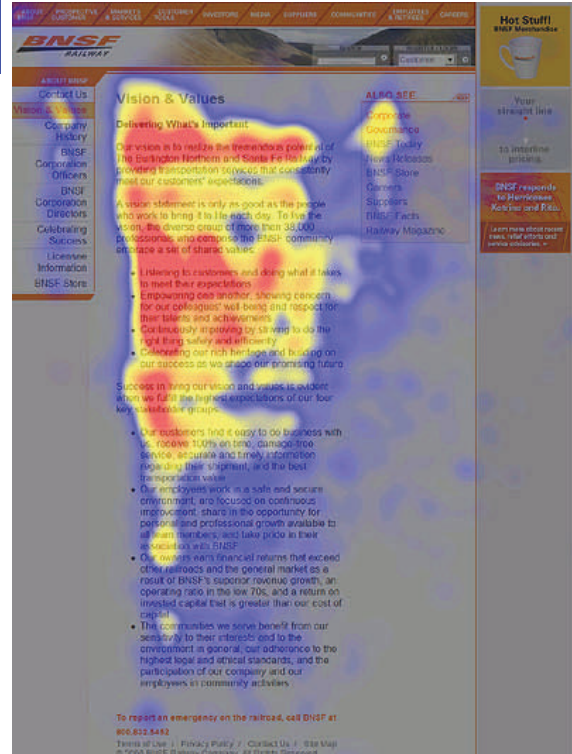
Based on those initial impressions, Web users will decide if the Website is valuable. Web content writers likely have between 3 and 10 seconds to make their best impression.

Also, these studies show that Web users lose interest the farther down a page they must scroll (another argument against long, convoluted paragraphs).

When a site's content accounts for the Four Guidelines, comprehension increases as reading time falls. In Nielsen's study, lower-literacy users saw a 135% improvement in how quickly they could complete tasks once a site's content had been revised.*

(*<http://www.useit.com/alertbox/20050314.html>)

The improvements for lower-literacy users did NOT come at the expense of higher-literacy users. In fact, **the performance of high literacy individuals also showed marked improvement**, as well. Optimizing content is not “dumbing it down.” It benefits the entire audience.



Example of an eye-tracking "heat map" that shows how much users looked at different parts of a Web page.

(<http://www.useit.com/eyetracking/>)

PART IV—SEO

SEO, or “**Search Engine Optimization**,” refers to a way of writing that specifically targets search engines, such as Google.

Without getting too technical, there are a couple of ways that Google’s search algorithm finds content on the web:

First, the more popular your site is, the more it is linked to by other sites, the greater the chance your site will appear high in the search rankings.

Google’s search algorithm also looks for key phrases in your Website’s text, laid out in a particular manner. Properly formatting and placing these phrases, or “keywords,” is absolutely vital.

SEO BASICS

- A page of text should run 500 words or so. Google seems attracted to this length.
- Think about the 4 or 5 things you want to be known for as an organization. Those should be your main keywords.
- Use your keywords in page headings and menu links. Google will view these as your keywords.
- Use keywords as links to other pages in your site containing the same keywords. It may be helpful to create a few extra pages on your site expressly for this purpose.
- Use your keywords at the top of the page, when possible.
- **Keywords should comprise 5% - 8% of your site text.** Too few, and your content isn’t optimized, too many and Google will think you’re trying to game the system, and will discount your page in the rankings

PART V—EDITING

Once the initial draft has been completed, it will likely still be too long. Further editing will give the content the polish it deserves.

A good approach to editing Web content is to take what currently rests on the site and cut it in half.

Remember— Web content should be approximately 50% as long as its print counterpart.

Work, work, work to find ways to tighten the structure, eliminate unnecessary items, and make the final product sleek and polished. In the end, it should look more like a Ferrari and less like a Hummer.

If you are using Microsoft Word, the program has an outstanding tool which grades the readability of the content. It calculates the number of passive sentences, average sentences per paragraph, average words per sentence, reading ease, and reading grade level. To use it,

- Navigate to the Spelling and Grammar tool:
- Click on “Check Grammar as You Type,” then
- “Check Grammar with Spelling,” and lastly
- “Show Readability Statistics”

After clicking on the spell checker, it will scan the document. At the end of the process, a box will appear displaying the statistics.



Make sure all the text is free from

- **typos**
- **errors in grammar or syntax**
- **factual inaccuracies**

PART VI—CONCLUSION

Finally, and before submitting the piece for publication to the Website, ask:

**Does this content represent the business/organization
in the best possible way?**

If so, publish, if unsure, ask for a second opinion - there is no shame in it. Remember, don't let ego get in the way. It's just good business.

For questions and comments about this White Paper, please contact Daniel Quinn on the phone at **773.991.1368**, email at [*quinn@onehundredwordSORless.com*](mailto:quinn@onehundredwordSORless.com), or on the web at <http://onehundredwordSORless.com>.