Writing for the Web

1. Differences between reading online and reading print

Why are print and online different? (1)

Reading on screens is up to 25% slower

- Computer screens have lower resolution (typically 96dpi) than printed paper (typically 600dpi or more)
  - Less information is visible at any one time
  - Text takes more effort to read

The interaction with computers (and screens) is also intrinsically different to papers, books, magazines, …

Here is a line of text in a Word document, and as you can see it all fits onto a single line on A4 paper.

Accessibility
Usability

Here is a line of text in a Word document, and as you can see it all fits onto a single line on A4 paper.

News

Why are print and online different? (2)

Key idea: most people <u>scan</u> key parts of the page

– People rarely read every line of a page

In fact, people look all over the place…

Reading online: eye tracking

What do people look for?

People scan the key parts of the page:

- Main heading

- Pictures

- Sub-headings

- Paragraphs (especially the starts)

- Sentences (especially the starts and ends)

- Bulleted lists (like this one!)

- Links

- Eventually, words

Importance of tailoring content

Content must be different online

– Warning bell – someone gives you a document and asks you to "just put it online"

A simple example…

Reading online: article example (1)

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Reading online: article example (2)

2. Web writing guidelines

Key thoughts

Key thought 1: use all tips and techniques in their appropriate place – these are not hard and fast rules.

– Legal document, or letter from the Vice-Chancellor – probably not worth changing the words!

Key thought 2: Think of your readers

1. Begin with the conclusion (1)

Begin with the conclusion: the **inverted pyramid**

May be useful to think about the following elements to identify key information:

- Who
- What
- Where
- When
- Why
- How

1. Begin with the conclusion (2)

Key advantages:

- – Helps people understand the content quickly
- – Easier to shorten

2. Paragraph breaks (1)

Too much text in one block can be difficult to read

- Use paragraph breaks often
- Put key points at the start of paragraphs

One of the simplest ways to make an improvement and it doesn't change the wording.

2. Paragraph breaks (2)

The course is assessed using a credit system, where lecture units, practical units and tutorials are assigned 10, or unusually 20 credits. A total of 120 credits must be taken each year and from these an average mark is calculated from the percentage attained in each unit. All first-year lecture units are taught over the course of one semester and are assessed through a multiple-choice examination at the end of the semester, except where stated otherwise in the unit description. The first year mark does not contribute to the overall degree classification, but the year must be passed (an overall mark of 40% or more) in order to progress to the second year of the programme. The second year sees more specialisation in the course specifications. However, there are fewer compulsory modules and more modules to choose from overall. Whilst retaining their personal tutor from year one, students work in tutorials with a separate academic tutor in year two. The tutorial is assessed solely through the dissertation, the title of which the student chooses after discussion with his or her tutor.

(Adapted from: http://www.manchester.ac.uk/undergraduate/courses/search/atoz/course/?code=00511&pg=4)

2. Paragraph breaks (3)

The course is assessed using a credit system, where lecture units, practical units and tutorials are assigned 10, or unusually 20 credits. A total of 120 credits must be taken each year and from these an average mark is calculated from the percentage attained in each unit.

All first-year lecture units are taught over the course of one semester and are assessed through a multiple-choice examination at the end of the semester, except where stated otherwise in the unit description.

The first year mark does not contribute to the overall degree classification, but the year must be passed (an overall mark of 40% or more) in order to progress to the second year of the programme.

The second year sees more specialisation in the course specifications. However, there are fewer compulsory modules and more modules to choose from overall.

3. Main headings (1)

Main headings should clearly and concisely reflect the information presented

– Extremely important part of the content

Write headings in sentence case (only capitalise the first letter of the first word)

3. Main headings (2)

Examples of what to avoid:

– Terms people may not understand

  • "Big Blue and Wall Street too" (Identified by useit.com)

– Idioms that will not be understood by all audiences

  • "Climate change in a nutshell"

– Headings that are too generic

  • "More information"

3. Main headings (3)

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3. Main headings (4)

Course marking and assessment

The course is assessed using a credit system, where lecture units, practical units and tutorials are assigned 10, or unusually 20 credits. A total of 120 credits must be taken each year and from these an average mark is calculated from the percentage attained in each unit.

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4. Sub-headings (1)

Sub-headings groups similar information together

- – Helps break up sections

- – Makes it easier to scan the content

- – Quick to put in and have an immediate impact

Sub-headings help scanability – make them meaningful, but not too long

Use sentence case for sub-headings

4. Sub-headings (2)

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The second year sees more specialisation in the course specifications. …

4. Sub-headings (3)

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First year

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The first year mark does not contribute to the overall degree classification, but the year must be passed (an overall mark of 40% or more) in order to progress to the second year of the programme.

Second year

The second year sees more specialisation in the course specifications. …

Before the last three guidelines…

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…and after the last three guidelines

Course marking and assessment

The course is assessed using a credit system, where lecture units, practical units and tutorials are assigned 10, or unusually 20 credits. A total of 120 credits must be taken each year and from these an average mark is calculated from the percentage attained in each unit.

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Second year

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5. Keywords first (1)

Put the important words first (that differentiate the content) in headings and links

– For example, if providing a list of reference documents:

"Guide to funding" ✖

"Funding guide" ✓

– Key idea: avoid starting with wasted words such as 'information'

"Information about the funding" ✖

"Funding" ✓

6. Long pages

Long pages are difficult to scan and find answers on

- – Even more difficult for some audiences with disabilities

At what point do you break a long page into sections?

- – Unfortunately, no single rule

- – Scrolling is okay… to an extent

7. Short sentences (1)

Keep the sentences simple with one main idea.

Also, keep the sentences short.

If you start creating longer sentences it is easy to establish a number of key points that while they may reinforce the original point it is quite difficult to track such an issue throughout the sentence in its entirety which makes it difficult for a person reading it to also identify its constituent elements.

7. Short sentences (2)

In the event that the Purchaser defaults in the payment of any instalment of purchase price, taxes, insurance, interest, or the annual charge described elsewhere herein, or shall default in the performance of any other obligations set forth in this Contract, the Seller may: at his option: (a) Declare immediately due and payable the entire unpaid balance of purchase price, with accrued interest, taxes, and annual charge, and demand full payment thereof, and enforce conveyance of the land by termination of the contract or according to the terms hereof, in which case the Purchaser shall also be liable to the Seller for reasonable attorney's fees for services rendered by any attorney on behalf of the Seller, or (b) sell said land and premises or any part thereof at public auction, in such manner, at such time and place, upon such terms and conditions, and upon such public notice as the Seller may deem best for the interest of all concerned, consisting of advertisement in a newspaper of general circulation in the county or city in which the security property is located at least once a week for Three (3) successive weeks or for such period as applicable law may require and, in case of default of any purchaser, to re-sell with such postponement of sale or resale and upon such public notice thereof as the Seller may determine, and upon compliance by the Purchaser with the terms of sale, and upon judicial approval as may be required by law, convey said land and premises in fee simple to and at the cost of the Purchaser, who shall not be liable to see to the application of the purchase money; and from the proceeds of the sale: First to pay all proper costs and charges, including but not limited to court costs, advertising expenses, auctioneer's allowance, the expenses, if any required to correct any irregularity in the title, premium for Seller's bond, auditor's fee, attorney's fee, and all other expenses of sale occurred in and about the protection and execution of this contract, and all moneys advanced for taxes, assessments, insurance, and with interest thereon as provided herein, and all taxes due upon said land and premises at time of sale, and to retain as compensation a commission of five percent (5%) on the amount of said sale or sales; SECOND, to pay the whole amount then remaining unpaid of the principal of said contract, and interest thereon to date of payment, whether the same shall be due or not, it being understood and agreed that upon such sale before maturity of the contract the balance thereof shall be immediately due and payable; THIRD, to pay liens of record against the security property according to their priority of lien and to the extent that funds remaining in the hands of the Seller are available; and LAST, to pay the remainder of said proceeds, if any, to the vendor, his heirs, personals representatives, successors or assigns upon the delivery and surrender to the vendee of possession of the land and premises, less costs and excess of obtaining possession.

(from www.plainenglish.co.uk)

7. Short sentences (3)

The opportunity for improving a web site's usability in the long term is truly exciting but can be notably impacted if a company does not embrace the need to train its content editors and, after any site improvement is actually made, continues to believe that the site improvement was a 'point in time' exercise rather than an ongoing and continual improvement which could make the site a more usable and effective resource for its users.

7. Short sentences (4)

The opportunity for improving a website's usability in the long term is truly exciting. However, it can be notably impacted if the company does not embrace the need to train its content editors.

Also, after any site improvement is actually made, the company may see the site improvement as just a 'point in time' exercise. A site's improvement should be seen as an ongoing and continual project. This will make the site a more usable and effective resource for its users.

8. Lists (1)

Information in lists is clearer, easier to scan and generally easier for readers to identify

Information in lists is:

– Clearer

– Easier to scan

– Generally easier for readers to identify

Use sparingly – easy to get carried away

8. Lists (2)

Q. How can I find out what material falls within the waiver conditions?

A.Details are explained in the following series of guidance notes: No 3 Copyright in Public Records; No 4 Reproduction of Court Forms ; No 6 Reproduction of United Kingdom, England, Wales and Northern Ireland Primary and Secondary Legislation; No 8 National Curriculum Material for England; No 9 Reproduction of Government Press Notices for England, Northern Ireland and Wales; No 10 National Curriculum Material for Wales

© Office of Public Sector Information (from older version of website)

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9. Jargon (1)

Avoid jargon

- ...unless you are certain your audience will understand it (or require it)

Easy jargon check: get it read by someone who won't know the jargon ✖

9. Jargon (2)

Watch out for acronyms

– MIB, NAFUM, SSC etc

In the first instance write out words in full and then put the acronym in brackets:

– "The Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) works to highlight …"

– Exceptions: UMIST, and qualifications such as GCSE, MA etc

In subsequent instances it's ok to use the acronym on its own

10. Prolixity (1)

Use short, simple words

"Any canine bearing a resemblance to said animal should be reported to the appropriate authorities." ✘

"Any dog that looks like the one we described should be reported to the police." ✔

10. Wasted words (2)

Get to the point!

"If you have any questions which have not been addressed by the information supplied above, you have the option to contact us by telephone on (0208) 123 4567." ✖

"Please contact us with any questions on (0208) 123 4567." ✔

10. Wasted words (3)

Watch out for potential wasted words

– Actually, quite, really, basically, …

Be positive with the actions

"At this point you might contact us if…"

"Please contact us if…"

10. Wasted words (4)

Avoiding wasted words is especially valuable for:

- Homepage, section pages, form instructions, …

Some useful guidelines:

- First couple of sentences are crucial

- Prioritise what people have to know

- Don't start with "Welcome to this section/site/form/…"

11. Link Names (1)

Link names should reflect the page they link to

– Names should make sense out of context of the surrounding text so avoid "Click here", "More information" etc

We will send you an email to confirm your booking. To book click <u>here</u>. ✖

We will send you an email to confirm your booking.

- <u>Book now</u> ✓

11. Link Names (2)

"We have recently completed a major update which makes our site easier to use. <u>More information</u>

If you are looking for our subjects page, <u>click here</u>. If you have a query about our publications, <u>click here</u>, or use our new A to Z feature (available <u>here</u>).

Our 2007 report is now available online. <u>Click here</u> to view it.

Also, apologies to people who were looking for our funding page and found <u>this</u> contact page instead! The link has now been fixed."

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Our <u>2007 report</u> is now available online.

Also, apologies to people who were looking for our <u>funding page</u> and found the contact page instead! The link has now been fixed."

11. Link Names (4)

Should I use a URL as a link name? In most cases, ideally not.

- – Give the link a clear and concise name that reflects its destination, rather than a URL

http://www.ucas.ac.uk/   ✖

UCAS website   ✓

http://www.accommodation.manchester.ac.uk/universityresidences/   ✖

University residences   ✓

12. Pages or attached files (1)

There are pros and cons for choosing web pages or attached files/PDFs

Web pages are generally better, but consider:

– Are users likely to print the information?

– How long is the text? Is it a self-contained document that can stand alone as a single entity?

13. You and we (1)

Where appropriate consider replacing formal terms with 'you' and 'we'

"The University of Manchester welcomes feedback" ✖

"We welcome your feedback" ✓

13. You and we (2)

Example

– "The University of Manchester will contact the course attendee to confirm their attendance. The University of Manchester will also make sure the attendee has directions to the course location."
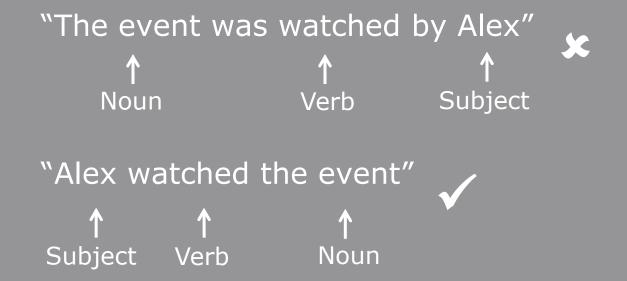
13. You and we (3)

Example

– "The University of Manchester will contact the course attendee to confirm their attendance. The University of Manchester will also make sure the attendee has directions to the course location."

– "We will contact you to confirm your attendance. We will also make sure you have directions to the course location."

14. The active voice (1)

Passive verbs:

- Make sentences longer
- Reduce emphasis

"The event was watched by Alex" ✘

↑ Noun   ↑ Verb   ↑ Subject

"Alex watched the event" ✔

↑ Subject   ↑ Verb   ↑ Noun

Thank you