

# A Writer's Edge Writing for the Web

By Georganna Hancock

Writing content for web pages is becoming more lucrative than writing for print publications. Often web clients provide all the information necessary for the project. The problem becomes one of condensing it, writing tight, because web page writing must be brief and easy on the eyes.

## Easier Reading

Reading text on a monitor is quite different from any other type of reading. It is tiring to the eyes. Repeated research verifies that online reading takes 25% longer than reading the same material from a printed page. Sans serif fonts (without all the little curlicues at the edges of the letters) are easier to read on the screen. The same is true of the shorter lines and paragraphs. In print writing, it is customary to leave two spaces after each sentence. The web doesn't care. The software will insert only one space, and some software requires two blank lines between paragraphs.

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Use the Arial, Verdana or another sans serif font. Adjust your line length to 10-12 words or about half the width of the screen. The paragraphs should all be under ten lines. These major characteristics, a plain font, short lines, and brief paragraphs, make text easier to scan, for that is how visitors view web pages when they first see them. They don't actually stop to read any amount of text until something catches their interest.

Online viewers want their information in bite-size chunks, quick to grasp. They aren't going to read long documents, either. It's better to provide a summary, perhaps with an outline, and offer the file in a downloadable format to print or read later. Another method for presenting more material is to provide an outline on the first page with links to the "meatier" material on a deeper level. This type of nonlinear writing is unique to hypertext, available only on the web.

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## More Tips

Some other web writing tips that help to catch viewers' interest and slow them down include using indents and bulleted lists to identify major points. In a similar fashion,

headers (headlines) and subheads catch the eye first. If you're designing the page, make the headers a different color from the paragraph text. Other design tricks include using colorful graphics, tables and charts for data, all with well-written captions.

Usability expert Jakob Nielsen's article on "How Users Read on the Web" at <http://www.useit.com/alertbox/9710a.html> suggests:

- \* highlight with hypertext, color, bolding, italics, or underlining
- \* craft meaningful rather than clever sub-headings
- \* stick with only one idea per paragraph
- \* write half the word count or less than conventional writing

Key words and phrases need to appear in your web writing, as well as in the headers throughout the page. These special terms cause search engines to display the link to the web page and catch the viewers' eyes during that first scan. They are the words and phrases the visitor has typed into the search engine, hoping to find what was wanted. Writers who know how to search engine optimize (SEO) their web content will be in greater demand.

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Content writing is more like journalism, the exact opposite of academic writing, in which the conclusion comes at the end of the work. The most important information goes at the beginning, a writing style known as "the inverted pyramid." You can learn more about this style on Nielsen's web page at: <http://www.useit.com/alertbox/9606.html> and in the Poynter Online article by Chip Scanlon at: <http://www.poynter.org/column.asp?id=52&aid=38693>.

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