

Writing For the Web – Make your product descriptions readable

In school, you learned to write documents that were formal, rigidly structured, and relatively impersonal. While it still works in many situations, that style won't earn you any A's from Web site visitors. When you're creating text for your Web site, remember the "Three S" rule: keep it **Simple**, **Succinct**, and **Scannable**.

Simplicity Rules!

Your site should be easy to use and understand, so first create a clean, simple design with an unambiguous navigation system. It's ok to repeat yourself: the repetition of images, text, colors, and formatting throughout the site ties it together. Visitors never have to wonder if they've inadvertently left your site.

Make it simple to read too:

- **Use contrasting colors** for page background and text. Dark text on a light background is easy to read.
- **Careful with background patterns:** they often obscure a site's content instead of complimenting it.
- **Avoid blinking or underlined text:** Blinking text distracts and annoys visitors. The only underlined text on your document should be hyperlinks.
- **Spell check!** Spelling errors make your site look unprofessional. Use a spell checker because it's often hard to find errors in your own copy.

But your writing style is most important. Keep it informal and make the meaning accessible to the average user. Avoid bureaucratic prose, third-person pronouns, and passive voice whenever possible. They sound unfriendly and place a distance between you and your visitors.

Carefully select the people who will write your Web site copy. Knowledge and experience in a particular field doesn't always translate into scintillating prose

Which would you rather read?

"Further inquiries and/or requests for additional information regarding our tax preparation and consulting services may be directed to our customer service department. To avoid extended response delays, all queries should be submitted online via user support form version 2.4."

OR

"Need more information? Our Customer Service Department is happy to answer your questions about our tax services. We can respond more quickly and completely if you use our online support form."

Remember that you aren't writing a term paper or a court brief. Be personable and friendly. You're trying to entice impatient Web site visitors to stay at your site and buy your products.

Get To The Point

User impatience isn't the only issue: fatigue is also a problem. A lot of content can be hard to read online because reading from computer screens is tiring on the eyes. Online reading is also about 25% slower than reading from print.

Effective page design can make it easier for visitors to read your content quickly.

- **Columns:** Format a text-heavy page with a column format instead of presenting the information in long lines of text that stretch all across the page.
- **Aid reading flow:** Avoid too-narrow columns. Most people read by scanning groups of words, not individual words. Extremely narrow columns break up that flow and make online reading more difficult.
- **Short paragraphs:** Keep them short and get right to the point in the first line. Try to keep the total length to less than five lines.

You're competing with millions of other pages for attention. Users are perfectly happy to skip to another site if they can't quickly find what they need at yours.

Highlight Important Information

Once you've ruthlessly edited your copy, design a page layout that visitors can scan quickly for important information.

Think about how you read online. Most users scan the content quickly, read the headlines or titles, and only then decide whether to read the actual content. Make your document more scannable by including:

- **Paragraph Headers:** Use paragraph headers and sub-headers to organize your document into sections. Useful section headers aid navigation and help visitors quickly locate pertinent information. Paragraph headers filled with keywords will also improve your rank in some search engines.
- **Bulleted Lists:** Break out important information into bulleted lists with brief descriptions of each item. Visitors' eyes will naturally gravitate towards those sections.
- **Colour and Contrast:** Highlight important sections using coloured backgrounds or contrasting text colours and fonts. A little goes a long way here: you lose visual impact if everything on the page is coloured and highlighted. You want to emphasize important sections, not distract visitors from your content.

While you're modifying your page layout and editing copy to appeal to online visitors, remember that you're also writing to be found by search engine spiders. Sprinkle your keywords and their synonyms throughout your copy, paying particular attention to paragraph headers and subheadings.