



# DM Best Practices

# Writing for the Web

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Effective web writing involves the having the proper content, written in the right style and formatted for effective scanning. This best practices paper will discuss ways to achieve this balance and includes useful tips for creating web content that your site's visitors will read.

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## Why good web writing matters

### People read differently on the web

For years, usability researchers have found that web users **rarely read entire pages**, word for word.

#### Web users:

- **Scan** pages
- Pick out **key words** and phrases
- Read in **quick**, short bursts
- Are **action** oriented
- Click and forage in search of **bits of information** that lead them **towards a goal**

There is evidence, in fact, that shows that reading on a screen is physiologically more difficult than reading on paper. Reading long paragraphs on a screen hurts the eyes, is laborious and time consuming in a medium known for speed.

Users **will read longer pages** if the content provides detail related to the user's specific goal. However, even though users will read more when the information provides extended information on their topic of interest, good web writing practices should still be employed. It is also important to note that **for long content, users may be more likely to print it out to read it.**

Effective web writing involves the having the proper content, written in the right style and formatted for effective scanning. The following pages will discuss ways to achieve this balance.

## The contents of your content

The web is no longer just another channel for communications. **Your website is your brand**—your dialog with your customers. Information is on-demand and how well you provide the information people want in the way they want it determines success.

The web is about understanding the audiences you serve and providing the content they want quickly and easily. **What's most important to your users is what should be most prominent on your website and the focus of that content should be on *them*.**

### Common content mistakes

In the early days of the web, success was measured in terms of numbers—having thousands of pages with hundreds of thousands of page views and millions of hits meant you had a successful

website. Because of the relative ease of publishing to the web, not to mention the low cost, organizations put anything and everything they possibly could on their websites.

Inexperienced content writers (often administrators with little or no experience in copywriting, let alone writing for the web) filled their sites with brochure-ware and felt obliged to explain to their readers how to navigate this new thing called a website.

A look at many modern websites will reveal a great number of organizations still living in the past. Designs and technologies may have improved, but the content creators in many cases are no savvier than they were ten years before and many old practices still prevail.

**Here are a few mistakes to avoid:**

**Do NOT:**

- ***Welcome people to your website and explain what a website is***  
How many times have you seen this? “I would like to personally welcome you to our department’s web page. We have put together a great collection of information and links to help you learn more about us. I invite you to look around and click the links to the left.” A website is a collection of information, no need to tell your readers that.
- ***Put your mission statement on your home page***  
Unless this is the most important content your users search for when visiting your site, it should not be on your home page. Don’t tell people what you do—show them by making your most important services and content available immediately on your site. Your users come to your site to do something—make it easy for them.
- ***Organize your website and write content to reflect your organization***  
Don’t require your users to figure out your internal organization to find content on your website. Present related tasks and content together on the site, regardless of who does them within your organization. If you were shopping for a car, you wouldn’t expect to be sent to the website for the engine department to find out what type of engine a car has, would you? Likewise, use language and terms that your audiences use, regardless of what you call them internally.
- ***Put every piece of printed content you have on your website***  
Just because you have it doesn’t mean your website visitors need to see it. Large volumes of content do not necessarily make good websites. If your visitors don’t need it and you can’t maintain it, do not put it on your site.
- ***Use “marketese” or promotional writing on the web***  
The web is a very direct, informal medium. When your readers scan your content, every word is valuable. Do not fill your pages with marketing “fluff” or needless formalities. Boastful, exaggerated language reduces the likelihood that your content will be read or believed.

- **Post a PDF version of a document unless necessary**  
Unless the format and integrity of the original printed document must be maintained, such as a printable form or brochure, do not use PDFs for the web. PDF (portable document format by Adobe), Word documents or any other printed document type are not intended for the web and pose issues with search-ability, access and readability. Besides, this paper is all about writing for the web—and if the content was written for print, chances are it's not appropriately formatted for your website.

## Writing Style

### Inverted pyramid style

*Traditional academic writing* follows a pyramid style—laying a foundation using many sources and supporting research, gradually working up to a logical conclusion. Writing in this style requires your users to do a lot of reading to get to the point. This *is not the way to write for the web*.

Good web writing follows the inverted pyramid style, which is borrowed from journalism. In this style, the most **important information is presented first**, with additional supporting detail to follow. By putting the main idea first, readers can decide if the content is relevant and either read more or move on, avoiding reading paragraphs of information only to find it was not what they were looking for.

#### When writing for the web:

- Catch your readers' **attention** in the **first few words**
- **Start with the conclusion**, follow with the details
- Remember: who, what, where, when, why and how
- Only **one idea** per paragraph
- Use **half the word count** of traditional writing

### Write to be found in a search

When writing, **use words that your target audiences use** when searching.

There are a number of **ways to identify words** your users search by:

- Ask them—in conversations, focus groups, surveys
- Check your web analytics

- If you have an internal search engine, check the search logs
- Use a service. Google offers free tools to help you determine keywords appropriate to your content: <https://adwords.google.com/select/KeywordToolExternal>

For example, a college may offer financial aid, but refer to the office and process as “Financial Assistance”. If your users call it “financial aid”, so should your website.

Your **keywords should be used both in the body of the page as well as in the headers**. If you’re using a CMS, it can help facilitate the entry of keywords in your headers.

## Be clear, concise and direct

### Use the active voice

When writing in the **active voice**, the subject does the action (e.g. “The president released a statement.”)

When writing in the **passive voice**, the subject receives the action (e.g. “A statement was released by the president.”)

### Cut wordy phrases

Try to make your sentences or phrases as concise and direct as possible.

*Wordy, passive phrase:*

**In the event that** it snows, the parking hotline **should be called prior to** coming to campus.

*Concise, active phrase:*

**If** it snows, **call** the parking hotline **before** coming to campus.

### Words to use

Being concise and direct requires good word choice.

Instead of . . .	Use . . .
the reason for	<b>because, since, why</b>
for the reason that	
due to the fact that	
owing to the fact that	
in light of the fact that	
considering the fact that	
on the grounds that	
this is why	

Instead of . . .	Use . . .
<p>despite the fact that  regardless of the fact that  notwithstanding the fact that</p>	<p><b>although, even, though</b></p>
<p>in the event that  if it should transpire/happen that  under circumstances in which</p>	<p><b>if</b></p>
<p>on the occasion of  in a situation in which  under circumstances in which</p>	<p><b>when</b></p>
<p>as regards  in reference to  with regard to  concerning the matter of  where . . . is concerned</p>	<p><b>about</b></p>
<p>it is crucial that  it is necessary that  there is a need/necessity for  it is important that  it is incumbent upon  cannot be avoided</p>	<p><b>must, should</b></p>
<p>is able to  has the opportunity to  is in a position to  has the capacity for  has the ability to</p>	<p><b>Can</b></p>
<p>it is possible that  there is a chance that  it could happen that  the possibility exists for</p>	<p><b>may, might, can, could</b></p>
<p>prior to  in anticipation of  subsequent to  at the same time as</p>	<p><b>before, after, as</b></p>

Source: University of Wisconsin- Madison Writing Center

### Use simple words

You don't need to impress your readers with your word choice. People read simpler words faster.

Instead of . . .	Use . . .
obtain	Get
prior to	Before
purchase	Buy
request	ask for
subsequent	Next
terminate	End
utilize	Use
cognizant	Know
facilitate	Help

*Tip:* When writing, think about how you might say the same thing to someone on the telephone.

### Provide Context

To help readers scan your page, it is important to provide them with cues that a particular section or instruction applies to them. The best way to do this is to **start with something the user already knows**, and then provide the new information (this is known as the “**Given- New Principle**”).

*Example:*

“If your financial aid award includes a PLUS loan, send the following documentation to the Student Accounts office:”

### Use parallel construction

To improve readability, present similar content in parallel constructions— **consistent patterns in the way information is written**.

- People anticipate patterns when reading and grasp information more quickly when patterns exist.
- Switching patterns requires more mental energy.



### **Example:**

#### *Parallel*

##### **View your purchase history**

- If you **already have an account**, [sign in](#) to view your records
- If you **don't have an account**, complete the [new account request form](#)

#### *Non-parallel*

Customers can view their purchasing history with us online. To do so, simply [sign in](#) to our online account system. Customers who have never used the system must complete a [new account request](#) in order to gain access to the system.

### **Sentence fragments are o.k.**

When writing for the web, **complete sentences are not always necessary**. There is a difference between coherent fragments or phrases and telegraphic writing.

**Avoid telegraphic writing**—leaving out articles such as “the” or “a” to shorten a sentence. This only makes the sentence more difficult to read and comprehend. Telegraphic writing may be appropriate for navigation, but not in the body of the page.

#### **Examples:**

##### *Fragment:*

Free gift with purchase!

##### *Telegraphic writing:*

Customer receives free item with purchase of book.

### **Use longer, more descriptive links**

Your users should know what to expect when clicking a link.

When providing links in your content (contextual links), **choose 7-11 words** that are informative.

You may also choose to **provide brief descriptions** with a shorter link to inform your audiences.

*Examples:*

*Vague link:*

[Directory](#)

*Descriptive link:*

[Find a person in the employee directory](#)

Or

[Search employee directory](#)

*Contact information for employees, including email and telephone numbers*

## Introduction text: good or bad?

Research shows that **most readers skip the introductory text on web pages** and jump directly to the more scan-able information.

*The reason for this is two-fold:*

- Intro text is usually meaningless (“Welcome to our website”)
- Intro text is usually too long

*Intro text can be quite useful and improve the usability of a page if it is:*

- A summary of what is to be found on the page (Focused on: What? Why?)
- Kept to 1-2 sentences

## Using metadata

**Metadata is information about information.** It’s the data used to **describe and categorize** your content. It facilitates the searching, sorting and presentation of your content in a website.

**Keywords** are one form of metadata, but not the only one. **Headings, summaries, author information, publication date, ratings and tags are all considered metadata.**

## Page descriptions

Every page of your website should have carefully written metadata, most importantly the page title, description and keywords, which are included in the HTML code for each page. The unique title of the page should **describe the exact content on that page**. The description, usually 15-25 words, is often displayed in search results. Titles and descriptions should be brief and very descriptive.

## Structured metadata

Your content management system may allow you to structure metadata and control the vocabulary used by your content contributors to **promote consistency** across your website. The use of tags, categories and relationships in your CMS is an excellent way to encourage the proper categorization of content and promotes its re-use throughout the website.

## Folksonomy

You may even consider **allowing your website visitors to determine the tags, keywords and categories** associated with your content. By allowing users to tag content themselves, you can avoid the use of vocabulary and structure that is unfamiliar to people outside of your organization. Such a social, collaborative classification system is known as a folksonomy and is popular in current web 2.0 sites such as YouTube and Flickr.

## Formatting

### Use headlines and headings

The headline at the top of the page should **identify the content of the page immediately**. Headlines and sub-headings within the page break up the content and make it very **easy to scan**.

#### Headings should provide visual cues

Headlines and section headings should be high contrast and attract the eye, while acting as a bullet-point summary of the page. Create a consistent visual hierarchy with your headlines that will give readers visual cues to the **importance and relationship** of your content by virtue of color, font and size. Well designed websites will use CSS (cascading style sheets) to specify fonts and colors for various headers (e.g. Header1, Header2, etc.) These can be made available to non-technical web editors through the content editor of your CMS.

By simply reading only the headings on the page, one should get a fairly **quick idea of what the page is all about**. The reader can then decide to read on or move on.

## Headings should be useful

Headings should inform the content that appears below them. Be clear and precise. Cutesy headings do nothing to help your reader.

### *There are a number of ways to write headings*

- **Questions** are most appropriate for user guides, procedures and policies. Questions make good headings. However, be sure your questions are phrased as your users would phrase them.
- **Phrases and sentences** are good for creating subheadings within a long page of content.
- **Nouns as headings** should be used only when the noun clearly identifies something the user is looking for. Nouns, however, are less action oriented than the other heading types.

### *Examples:*

*Question:* How do I apply for admission to the college?

*Verb phrase:* Applying for admission to the college

*Imperative:* Apply for admission to the college

*Sentence:* There are three steps to the college admission application.

*Noun:* Application for admission

## Highlight keywords in your text

Bold, italics, color, font and links are all forms of highlighting. This should be **used sparingly**—once or twice in each paragraph at the most.

Avoid the temptation to use extra large fonts in wild colors (and never make them blink) simply to grab the reader's attention. Choosing colors and styles that do not fit the site's styles and color palettes will only lessen the integrity of your site and **turn readers off** to your content.

## Use bulleted or numbered lists

Lists create **chunks of content** that facilitates scanning. They can separate ideas and allow for counting.

*Use lists for:*

- Options
- Steps
- Items

For **steps in a process**, use numbered lists and action oriented imperatives (“open this” or “click on” or “do this”)

*Example:*

1. [Register](#) for a username
2. [Log-in](#) to the portal
3. [Download the application](#)

## Use numerals

When writing numbers, particularly as they represent facts, **use numerals instead of words** (i.e. 5 instead of five)

## Word count rules of thumb

To limit your word count when writing for the web, use the following general rules:

**Headings:** 8-10 words or less

**Sentences:** 15-20 words

**Paragraphs:** 40-70 words

**Pages:** 500 words or less

## Proper writing style can dramatically improve usability

Jakob Nielsen found that creating objective, scan-able and concise content on a site improved usability by 124%. He measured 5 different versions of the same website (same information and navigation, with variations in wording and format) and found the following:

Site Version	Sample Paragraph	Usability Improvement
<b>Promotional writing (control condition)</b> using the "marketese" found on many commercial websites	Nebraska is filled with internationally recognized attractions that draw large crowds of people every year, without fail. In 1996, some of the most popular places were Fort Robinson State Park (355,000 visitors), Scotts Bluff National Monument (132,166), Arbor Lodge State Historical Park & Museum (100,000), <a href="#">Carhenge</a> (86,598), Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer (60,002), and Buffalo Bill Ranch State Historical Park (28,446).	0% (by definition)
<b>Concise text</b> with about half the word count as the control condition	In 1996, six of the best-attended attractions in Nebraska were Fort Robinson State Park, Scotts Bluff National Monument, Arbor Lodge State Historical Park & Museum, <a href="#">Carhenge</a> , Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer, and Buffalo Bill Ranch State Historical Park.	58%
<b>Scannable layout</b> using the same text as the control condition in a layout that facilitated scanning	Nebraska is filled with internationally recognized attractions that draw large crowds of people every year, without fail. In 1996, some of the most popular places were: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fort Robinson State Park (355,000 visitors)</li> <li>• Scotts Bluff National Monument (132,166)</li> <li>• Arbor Lodge State Historical Park &amp; Museum (100,000)</li> <li>• <a href="#">Carhenge</a> (86,598)</li> <li>• Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer (60,002)</li> <li>• Buffalo Bill Ranch State Historical Park (28,446).</li> </ul>	47%
<b>Objective language</b> using neutral rather than subjective, boastful, or exaggerated language (otherwise the same as the control condition)	Nebraska has several attractions. In 1996, some of the most-visited places were Fort Robinson State Park (355,000 visitors), Scotts Bluff National Monument (132,166), Arbor Lodge State Historical Park & Museum (100,000), <a href="#">Carhenge</a> (86,598), Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer (60,002), and Buffalo Bill Ranch State Historical Park (28,446).	27%
<b>Combined version</b> using all three improvements in writing style together: concise, scannable, and objective	In 1996, six of the most-visited places in Nebraska were: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fort Robinson State Park</li> <li>• Scotts Bluff National Monument</li> <li>• Arbor Lodge State Historical Park &amp; Museum</li> <li>• <a href="#">Carhenge</a></li> <li>• Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer</li> <li>• Buffalo Bill Ranch State Historical Park</li> </ul>	124%

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*Web Solutions that Work*

Dotmarketing (DM) builds enterprise level websites for higher & continuing education institutions, associations, foundations and service-based corporations. Since 1996, DM has successfully implemented web solutions for more than 250 client projects.

DM is also the originator and chief developer of dotCMS – an open source product offering a suite of web tools & solutions including an enterprise content management system (CMS), customer relationship management toolset (CRM), eCommerce, knowledge asset management system, web-based communication tools and more.