

# Writing for the Web

By Elena Fawkner

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When researching this week's article, I went looking for resources related to "writing for the web". I found a great deal of useful information, which I'm going to share with you in a minute. But in my travels, I came across this little gem from the website of a professional writer, no less, trying to sell me on why I should use his services if I want to make a good impression on my website visitors:

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"Today's readers and Web browsers demand frankness and verisimilitude, so your written communications require exacting professional integrity with accurate and adequate research. "For concrete, colorful and dynamic written material that willfully attracts customers, Bob Tony\* will work with you to develop unrivaled written communications for your marketing materials, grants, newsletters, Web site, or other publications and articles. To ensure your writing tasks with pacesetting presentation and unparalleled, consistent editorial power, give your deadlines to Bob Tony\*."

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\* Name changed to protect the ostentatious and largiloquent. Good grief. "Verisimilitude"? I had to look it up. I'm sure you all know what it means but in case there's another ignoramus out there besides me, it means "the quality of appearing to be true or real". How ironic. "Willfully" attracting customers? And does that last sentence even make sense?

Consider that a shining example of how it's NOT done (writing for the web, that is).

Before we get to \*how\* to write well for the web, a brief pause to consider \*why\* it's important to do so at all. The reason is that the Internet is an information medium. As a general rule, people are looking for information about something when they come online. You have to supply some of the information sought by part of that market (i.e., your target market) if you want your share of traffic to your website. You do that by creating quality content. In order to create quality content, you need to be able to write for the web. Is writing for the web really all that different from writing generally? Yes. And here's why.

## WHY WRITING FOR THE WEB IS DIFFERENT

The first thing you need to understand is how users read on the web. Unlike reading a book, online readers scan, or skim, the page, looking for particular keywords relevant to the subject about which they are interested. They don't start at the top of the page and work their way down, reading every sentence.

Some other things you need to know about your typical site visitor (let's just call him Sam to make it easier): Sam detests hyperbole. Nothing turns him off faster. So keep the marketing hype to a minimum and instead make your content objective and somewhat restrained.

Sam is also an impatient sod. He's going to quickly scan the page (as we've seen) and he's going to rely on your headings and subheadings to orient himself. And he doesn't want to have to hunt for your point. Give it to him upfront. Also, because Sam really hates this, avoid lengthy webpages that make him have to scroll to keep reading. And keep the whole thing short and to the point besides. If you don't, he's out of there in five seconds flat.

So, now that we understand a little bit about Sam, what can we do to capture his attention and keep it long enough to give him what he wants?

## SCANNABLE TEXT

To help Sam scan your text and find what he's looking for quickly, highlight keywords and phrases (either by bolding, using color, a different font effect, whatever will catch his attention). Make sure you use meaningful subheadings, i.e. ensure your subheading makes sense without having to read the text below to put it into context.

Avoid lengthy paragraphs and make sure each paragraph deals with only one idea. Instead of long paragraphs, use bulleted lists containing short, high-impact sentences.

Another crucial point is to use the "inverted pyramid" principle.

This just means that you state your conclusion or most important information up front, and then use the rest of the body of your text to elaborate and explain. Kind of like a newspaper story.

And because Sam hates to scroll, break your text into logical stand-alone sub-parts of no longer than a single page (or screen) and then link (with a meaningfully-worded link) to the next section which starts on a new page.

## FEWER WORDS THE BETTER

Make sure your writing is not woolly. You need to write with the precision of a surgeon wielding a scalpel. No superfluous words allowed. Write for effect, by all means, but get to the point and fast! In other words, be succinct.

## CREDIBILITY

Nothing gets that mouse finger itchier than the perception that the author of the work lacks credibility. The top three culprits are hyperbole (avoid marketing hype at all costs and go for restrained objectivity instead), typos and grammatical errors. Sam likes to think you've done your homework too so make sure you include links to reputable sources elsewhere on the web (but not too many or you risk losing him for good).

## TONE

One of the major differences in writing for the web compared to other forms of writing is the inherently impersonal nature of the medium. Instead of holding a comfortably reassuring book in his hands, or getting black smudge on his fingers from the newspaper, Sam's only contact with you is your words on a computer screen. You need to overcome the impersonal nature of the medium if you expect to reach Sam with your words. It is for this reason that "write as you speak" is so much the norm on the Internet.

Be informal and conversational in your writing (note, this is NOT a license to churn out shoddy, unprofessional work- writing conversationally and informally is every bit as demanding as writing formally, if not more so) and be personal while you're at it (use "you" and "your" a lot). Most importantly, allow your personality to come through. You need to connect with Sam before he will invest in you so make sure you reach him with your writing.

## DESIGN AND LEGIBILITY

Finally, just because it's less comfortable to read from a computer screen than a book or newspaper doesn't mean you can't make it less uncomfortable. Choose the font you use with care. Times is a common default font for a lot of web pages but it doesn't

"pixellate" well. Better choices are Arial or Verdana.

Consider your choice of color and contrast carefully too. A dark font on a light background is best for lengthy reading sessions but a light font on a dark background can be effective if used sparingly.

So there you have it. Some relatively quick and easy steps you can take today to make it more likely Sam will get your message. And come back for more.

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