

# Getting Looked Over, Without Getting Overlooked: Writing for

## Scanners and Skimmers

By Matthew Cobb

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### \*Scanning and Skimming Practices\*

Whether you're writing e-mail messages or Web site sales letters, you need to know how to hold the attention of different types of readers. Even the readers that don't actually "read."

Most readers will either scan, skim, or both, especially when reading online or when reading long pieces. Optimizing the writing on your site for those who scan and those who skim isn't extremely difficult, but it does require an attention to detail.

First, let's take a look at what these terms mean.

Scanning--involves looking for particular elements, such as headlines, subheadings, and text that is highlighted, bold-faced, or otherwise emphasized. Scanners read only the elements that "stick out," their eyes moving from one attention-grabbing word or phrase to another.

Skimming--involves looking over the entire page but only superficially, like a speed-reader. Skimmers may see the same elements that scanners do, but they don't focus that much on anything specific for very long. They glance over all of it, just trying to get the basic idea.

Most readers do a combination of scanning and skimming. They might scan a page and find a headline that grabs their attention, then skim the paragraph beneath it. Only when they find something really interesting will they go back and read.

Sometimes, the information in the various headings and emphasized text is all the information a visitor needs. In fact, a visitor to a consumer sales site should conceivably be able to make their entire buying decision based solely on the headlines and emphasized text.

It's important to note that scanning and skimming isn't something that was created by the Web. (It just seems like it sometimes.) Audiences have been skimming newspaper headlines and flipping through TV channels for quite some time now.

#### \*6 Steps for Writing for Scanners and Skimmers\*

In the Information Overload Age, consumers have grown tired of sales hype and marketing fluff. They're already predisposed to skimming and scanning. Short attention spans and a high level of skepticism are becoming a part of their nature.

But all is not lost. Optimizing for scanners and skimmers (and turning them into readers) isn't easy, but you can do it if you take a steady approach and revise carefully. Here's an example of how you can do it:

Step 1) Write out the main points of your sales argument (which some will call a sales "pitch," but since I want to persuade rather than "pitch," I look at this process as a kind of debate...hence, a sales argument.) These main points will be your subheadings. List them as a skeleton outline for your piece, and leave space beneath each.

Step 2) Below each main point, write down the main words and phrases associated with each point in your argument.

Step 3) Start writing the body of the piece. Here, you'll explain everything in full detail. People who read the body of your message want details, so you should provide all the relevant information that you can imagine a potential customer might want to read.

Step 4) Take the words and phrases you generated in Step 2 and thread them throughout the body of the message. Make sure they work within the context of the paragraphs (in other words, don't just throw them in anywhere.) Use bold-facing, italics, underlining, or highlights to draw attention to these words or phrases. (Just don't go overboard... too much emphasis can come off as "salesy", and you'll need to only use as much emphasized text as

you think your audience will deem credible. An ad for a luxury car won't use as much emphasized text as a sales letter for the latest mail-order kitchen gizmo.)

Step 5) Look at all you've written and come up with a headline that ties it all together with a strong, unique benefit. The headline should generate curiosity and target a specific audience. Statistics and testimonials generally make strong headlines by getting attention and establishing credibility, which is important for making a connection with your target audience.

Step 6) At this point, you've written your first draft. As you read back through what you have, ask yourself a few questions: Does my headline lead logically to my subheads? Do my subheads lead logically to the emphasized text? Does the emphasized text fit logically into the context of the body? Most importantly, can a visitor make a buying decision based solely on the headings and emphasized text?

Sometimes, you'll find that certain elements no longer fit the original argument. Your approach may change. That's okay. Revise until everything flows together and makes sense during the first reading.

Never be afraid to go back and rewrite. Always use the strongest material, even if that means deleting half of what you've already written. It's the only way to get your best work.

The truth is, most readers won't make it to the body of your message. That's okay--don't expect them to. Not all of them will be right for your offer.

You need be able to get your points across with good headlines, subheadings, and emphasized text. If you can do that, you won't have to be afraid of how--or whether--your visitors actually read the entire page.

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