



## Guidelines on writing copy for the web

### Introduction

Writing for the web is not like writing for a hard copy publication. The three main guidelines for writing for the web are:

1. Be **succinct**: write no more than 50% of the text you would have used in a hardcopy publication and keep articles to an maximum of 600 words (preferably less).
2. Write for **scannability**: do not require users to read long, continuous blocks of text.
3. Use **hypertext to split up** long information into multiple pages.

### Short texts

Reading from computer screens is about **25% slower** than reading from paper. As a result, people do not want to read a lot of text from computer screens. You should **write 50% less text**. We also know that users do not like to scroll: one more reason to keep pages short.

### Scannability

As it takes more time to read text on computer screens, and because the online experience seems to foster an element of impatience, users tend not to read streams of text fully. Instead, users scan text and pick out keywords, sentences, and paragraphs of interest while skipping over those parts of the text they care less about.

Skimming instead of reading is a fact of the web and has been confirmed by countless usability studies. Webwriters have to acknowledge this fact and write for scannability:

- Structure articles with two or even three levels of **headlines** (a general page heading plus subheads - and sub-sub-heads when appropriate).
- Use meaningful rather than 'cute' headings. Reading a heading should *tell* the user what the page or section is about.
- Use **highlighting and emphasis** to make important words catch the user's eye. Coloured text can also be used for emphasis, and hypertext anchors stand out by virtue of being blue and underlined.

### Hypertext structure

Make text short without sacrificing depth of content by splitting the information up into multiple nodes connected by hypertext links. Each page can be brief and yet the full hyperspace can contain much more information than would be feasible in a printed article. Long and detailed background information can be relegated to secondary pages. Similarly, information of interest to a minority of readers can be made available through a link without penalising those readers who do not want it.

Hypertext should *not* be used to segment a long linear story into multiple pages: having to download several segments slows down reading and makes printing more difficult. Proper hypertext structure is not a single flow '*continued on page 2*'; instead, split the information into coherent chunks that each **focus on a certain topic**. The guiding principle should be to allow readers to select those topics they care about and only download those pages. In other words, the hypertext structure should be based on an **audience analysis**.

Each hypertext page should be written according to the 'inverse pyramid' principle (see below) and start with a short conclusion, so that users can get the gist of the page even if they do not read all of it.

### Pyramid principle

Journalists have long adhered to this inverse approach to writing: start the article by telling the reader the conclusion ("After long debate, the Assembly voted to increase state taxes by 10 per cent"), follow by the most important supporting information, and end by giving the background. This style is known as the *inverted pyramid* because it turns the traditional pyramid style around. Inverted-pyramid writing is useful for newspapers because readers can stop at any time and will still get the most important parts of the article.

On the web, the inverted pyramid becomes even more important, since studies show that *users do not scroll*, so they will very frequently be left to read only the top part of an article. Very interested readers *will* scroll, and these few motivated souls will reach the foundation of the pyramid and get the full story in all its detail.