Writing for the Web

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Challenges of Web Text

- Harder/slower to read on screen
- Easily distracted users can always go somewhere else
- Text is often afterthought in site design/architecture
To write well for the Web, we need to know:

*How do people read on the Web?*
Jakob Nielsen’s Research

- 79% don’t “read” the Web
- People scan the Web
- Skim text for key words, subheads, and lists
What Works Best on the Web?

Nielsen tested 5 approaches to text:

• Promotional writing
• Concise text
• Scannable layout
• Objective layout
• Combined approach
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), Carhenge (86,598), Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer (60,002), and Buffalo Bill Ranch State Historical Park (28,446).
In 1996, six of the most-visited places in Nebraska were:

- Fort Robinson State Park
- Scotts Bluff National Monument
- Arbor Lodge State Historical Park & Museum
- Carhenge
- Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer
- Buffalo Bill Ranch State Historical Park
Nielsen’s Key Recommendations

• One idea per paragraph
• Limit word count to ½ of printed text
• Stick to facts
• Eliminate “marketese”
Stanford/Poynter Institute

- First eye-tracking study of Web users
- Focused on online news sites
- Findings applicable to other types of sites
Stanford/Poynter Findings

- Users see and read text *before* graphics
- Users read *shallow*, but *wide*
- Users *will* scroll to read articles *they* find interesting
What’s It Mean?

• Readers treat Web text differently than they treat print text
• Good writing still counts
• *Every* word counts
• Journalism, not academic writing, is best model for Web text
WRITING FOR THE WEB

Academic Writing

• Introduction
• Background & literature
• Explanation of research & methods
• Analysis of data
• Discussion of results
• Conclusion
Journalistic Writing

“Inverted pyramid”

1. Big picture/conclusions
2. Findings
3. Discussion
4. Background and depth
Writing for the Web

Edit for Brevity and Action

• Use active, not passive voice
• Simple, declarative and imperative sentence structures
• Don’t “noun-ify” good verbs
• Use second-person where possible
• Be precise—avoid ambiguity
• Kill all useless words without mercy
Other Guidelines

• Avoid self-promotion and jargon
• Short and direct = good
• Choppy = bad
• Focus on content, not interface
Be Consistent: Use Stylesheets

- Editorial stylesheets, not CSS
- Defines how you treat:
  - Numbers and measurements
  - Common, unusual, or technical terms
  - Abbreviations, titles, punctuation
- Helps keep multiple authors on same page