Writing for the Web

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

Promotional Writing

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).
Combined Approach

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
WRITING FOR THE WEB

Stanford/Poynter Findings

• Users see and read text before graphics
• Users read shallow, but wide
• Users will scroll to read articles they find interesting

WRITING FOR THE WEB

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

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
• Chopping = bad
• Focus on content, not interface
WRITING FOR THE WEB

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

Developing the Web Site

for

PENNSTATE School of Underwater Basket Weaving
SUBW
Who’s on your team?

- Member of marketing/PR office
- IT professional
- Staff from leadership offices
- Stakeholder
- Team Leader
  Impartial if possible

Educate

- History of the Web site
- How it currently works
- Resources—staff, budget, technology

Expect this team to be intimidated by the Web

Site Comparisons

- Show them constituent sites
- Explain what goes into those sites
- Find out what appeals to them
Brainstorm Sessions

• Who’s our audience
• What are they looking for
• What do we want them to do after they visit our site
• How will we measure success
• How will we maintain the site

Bullets

The total cost of this 190,000 gross-square-foot state of the art building is anticipated at $23.5 million. Of this amount, the University must raise $5 million in private philanthropic support. Many prominent naming opportunities within the Swimalot Building exist for Penn State’s corporate partners, alumni, and friends including hands-on water lab, swim-through atrium level, cafeteria, oxygen tank storage room, and the aqua dome.
Bullets

The total cost of this 190,000 square-foot building is anticipated at $23.5 million. Of this amount, the University must raise $5 million in private philanthropic support. Many prominent naming opportunities within the Swimalot Building exist, including:

• hands-on water lab
• swim-through atrium level
• cafeteria
• oxygen tank storage room
• and the aqua dome

Paragraph Breaks

Penn State's plans to construct a new home for its School of Underwater Basket Weaving are now becoming reality thanks to a $10 million gift from Pittsburgh alumnus Isaac Swimalot. Swimalot, a 2002 Penn State graduate and a renowned weaver, is currently president of The AquaWeaving Corporation, a manufacturer of oxygen tanks and weight devices in Newark, New Jersey. While a student, Swimalot was president of the scuba club and captain of the (marco) polo team. He graduated with a 3.86 GPA and took over The AquaWeaving Corporation from his father, Idid Swimalot, a 1972 graduate of the College of the Liberal Arts.
The University's Board of Trustees will be asked to recognize the donors' generosity and vision by naming the facility the Swimalot Building for the Underwater Basket Weaving, according to President Graham B. Spanier. Ground-breaking ceremonies were held March 29. Construction is scheduled for completion by August 2004. The building, to be located in front of Old Main, will be made of a special straw like material which will be molded into the shape of a basket. Aqua colored ground cover will surround the building, conveying a water-like appearance.
Our Common Task

Get our message to our audience!

Publications Provide

- Accurate, up-to-date news and information
- “How-to” instructions
- Virus alerts
- Information on service changes
Alternatives to Content Presentation

- ITS Academic Computing Newsletter
  - Printed version
  - Online version (HTML, PDF)
  - Information conveyed via
    - Abstracts
    - FAQ format
    - Concise information

ITS Academic Computing Newsletter

Define Your Audience

- Manager, director, or administrator provided definition
  - Provide regular feedback to management
  - Be aware of policy change
  - Audience feedback
Web Surfers Are Selfish!
• Want reliable, helpful, up-to-date information
• Dislike unwieldy, slow media presentations
• Thoroughly test a new site
• Identify key information first

Research Similar Web Sites
• Benchmark similar sites
  – What works or doesn’t work?
  – Similarities and differences in presentation
• Generate ideas from other universities
  – Big Ten schools
  – Similar size or demographics

Content
• Primary concern
• Accessible information
• Be clear and concise
• Enhanced by design and programming
• Enable fast information gathering
• Contact information on each page
New Ideas

• Write an abstract
• Browse other university web sites
• Add contact information
• Improve the content on one page

Managing Your Content-Rich Web Site
Without Going Insane
In the paper world...

**audience:** incoming & current students

**need:** they have to know which courses to take, so they can graduate and earn more money and drive better cars than we do

**message/medium:** a booklet of college-specific programs & course information, printed each fall

In the online world...

**auditance:** faculty, administration & staff

**need:** need info on research, grants, resources and facilities. need all of their contact, biographical, and vitae information online...

**message & medium:** bunch of Web pages

**audience:** current students

**need:** need all current info on academics, advising, student organizations, internships & careers, scholarships, events, facilities...

**message:** bunch of Web pages

**audience:** students organizations

**need:** need to post info about their groups

**message & medium:** bunch of Web pages

**audience:** administrators

**need:** pages about themselves, strategic plan, other administrative info...

**message & medium:** bunch of Web pages

**audience:** sponsors & stakeholders

**need:** need info on partnerships, philanthropy, advisory board...

**message & medium:** bunch of Web pages

**audience:** prospecut students and their families

**need:** need info on admission, academic programs, student life, recruiting events...

**message & medium:** bunch of Web pages

**audience:** alumni

**need:** need info on events, alumni networks, hiring grads...

**message & medium:** bunch of Web pages

**audience:** student organizations

**need:** need to post info about their groups

**message & medium:** bunch of Web pages

**audience:** visitors

**need:** need info on the organization, directions, maps...

**message & medium:** bunch of Web pages

**audience:** viewers with disabilities

**need:** need ADA-compliant pages, text-only material

**message & medium:** bunch of Web pages

**audience:** those with old browsers

**need:** need LCD interface

**message & medium:** bunch of Web pages
Managing Your Content-Rich Web Site

In the online world...
- high volume of content
- multiple audiences, multiple needs, skills...
- new content coming down the pike all the time
- constant updates
- legal issues surrounding out-of-date, inaccurate content
- different browser generations, plug-ins, screen sizes...

Managing Your Content-Rich Web Site

So, how do you create & maintain all this online content for multiple audiences with multiple needs & keep your head?

Managing Your Content-Rich Web Site

Author for the statelessness of the Internet.

> Think “Internet” not “Paper.”
> Plan beyond Paper Dump.
> Rewrite Radon Content.
> Avoid making Promises in writing...that you might not keep.
> Steer clear of Calendar Hell.
> Stop Link Rot before it starts.
> Put the technology to work for you: with dynamic content.
Think “Internet” not “Paper.”

“Brochure’s all redesigned and printed and mailed. Time to update the site.”

“Let’s review the Web site every summer and put all updates in place by the start of the school year.”

“$120,000 should cover paper publication costs for 2003, leaving $2.68 in the Web site budget. That seems about right.”

---

Think “Internet” not “Paper.”

Forget the traditional “production schedule” for maintaining Web content. There is none.

Updates need to happen as soon as new information is available…

…not as an afterthought.

A Web Site is not a toy. Hire professionals.

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Plan beyond Paper Dump.

See page 16 of this brochure for admission requirements and an outline of required courses and electives for the Ph.D. program.
Plan beyond Paper Dump.
A brochure will never a Web page be.

Plan beyond Paper Dump.
Use PDFs appropriately (don’t rely on them to drive important content).
Plan beyond Paper Dump.

Shorten it.

Rewrite Radon Content.

Meet our 15 new faculty members
With plans to add 899 faculty within the next six months, we look to be the largest Liberal Arts college in the Universe.
Rewrite Radon Content.

Dr. Ivana Piper joins the school after a 35-year career in magazine publication. She will be assuming the role of Computer Engineering Department Head, replacing Dr. Eniac Prinze, who recently retired after 67 years.

A specialist in programming in iambic pentameter, Dr. Piper brings a unique perspective to the Computer Engineering curriculum. The department has been renamed Poetry and Programming and has undergone major restructuring to accommodate recently-added courses in haiku, Renaissance poetry, and naughty Limericks.

Translate - don’t regurgitate - material pulled from press releases.
Avoid making promises you might not keep.
This section of our Web site offers one-stop shopping for all the internships and careers information you, as an employer, will need.
More information coming soon!
An online application form will be available on this site next week.
You will receive a response from us within three days of your online request.

Avoid making promises you may not keep.
"One-Stop Shopping" went out with Woolworth's.
Information almost never comes "soon."
Or "next week."
Or "within three days."

Beware Calendar Hell.
The Six Levels of Calendar Hell
getting appropriate content and keeping it updated
getting others to contribute content and notify you of updates
obtaining events information from various resources (other calendars, newsletters, press releases, etc.)
maintaining multiple calendars ("calendaring")
replicating calendar material in online newsletters, hotspots, home page, tattoos...
getting old stuff the heck off the calendar
Beware Calendar Hell.

8/24/2002 – First-year students, don’t miss Orientation 2002, which runs from August 24 through August 28.
9/13/2002 – Happy birthday to Dr. Livermore, who turns 107 on September 13 of this year.

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This page last updated June 9, 1991
Send all Hate Mail to Webmaster.

Managing Your Content-Rich Web Site

One Solution:

news database & dynamic display populates:
- events
- press releases
- newsletters
- calendar of events
- online student newsletter
- faculty, staff, and friends newsletter
- custom news pages (e.g. Students in the News)
- portal.psu.edu (rss)
- events.psu.edu (rss in the works)

Calendar

ist.psu.edu/events
Managing Your Content-Rich Web Site

Stop Link Rot before it starts.

404 Error: Page Not Found

The page you are looking for, http://www.personal.psu.edu/hp/hpp4080/%20%hashpages/stuff/%monostuff/New%Penn%State%Howard%Page, might have been removed, had its name changed, or is temporarily unavailable.

Stop Link Rot before it starts.

- Ephemeral hosting
- Sites housed on personal Web space
- Pages developed by temporary or borrowed developers
- Absolute links that should have been relative
- Links embedded throughout content
- Unmonitored external links
- Links to so-called “archives”
Stop Link Rot before it starts.

Solutions

- Use link-checking tools such as Sitemapper, DreamWeaver, WebTrends, ColdFusion...
- Employ site proofreaders (humans) to check links regularly
- Maintain unified hosting of all your pages (one site, one server)
- Follow (and train employees on) best-practice standards for
  - directory structure
  - file naming
  - hyperlinks
  - separate content blocks from hyperlinks wherever possible
  - cross-linking within site
  - external links

Stop Link Rot before it starts.

Solutions

- Dynamic Content
  - keep links in separate database columns or tables
  - display links uniformly across site (user-friendly, ease of proof reading)
  - custom 404 error pages
  - 404 error notification

Managing Links: Dynamic Content
Put the technology to work for you with dynamic content.

- Delegate management of content
- Return management of content to primary authors
- Turn professional writers-editors loose on content management
- Make date stamps, dynamic calendars, do the maintenance for you.

Wednesday, June 18, 2003

Put the technology to work for you.

Link Check Tools

Macromedia Dreamweaver MX  macromedia.com

SiteMapper  www.trellian.com

WebTrends  www.netiq.com

ColdFusion  macromedia.com
Review
>
1. Think “Internet” not “Paper” when planning workflow
2. Plan beyond Paper Dump
3. Rewrite Radon Content
4. Avoid making Promises in writing...that you might not keep
5. Steer clear of Calendar Hell
6. Stop Link Rot before it starts
7. Put the technology to work for you: with dynamic content

Resources
Sites
1. Yale Web Style Guide www.med.yale.edu/caim/manual
2. Web Pages That Suck www.webpagesthat suck.com
3. WebMonkey hotwired.lycos.com/webmonkey
5. Poynter.org www.poynter.org
6. Penn State Copyright Information www.psu.edu/ur/copyright.html

More Sites
1. Penn State Copyright Information www.psu.edu/ur/copyright.html
2. Penn State Web Styleguide and Related Styleguides www.psu.edu/ur/webstyleguide
4. Web Pages That Suck www.webpagesthat suck.com
5. WebMonkey hotwired.lycos.com/webmonkey
7. Poynter.org www.poynter.org
Resources

More Sites
> Writing Hypertext Copy www.kbs.cs.tu-berlin.de/~jutta/ht/writing/text.html
> The Onion www.theonion.com
> Common Errors in English www.wsu.edu/~brians/errors/errors.html
> Web Pages That Suck www.webpagesathatsuck.com
> Jakob Nielsen’s Writing for the Web www.useit.com/papers/webwriting

Resources

Books
> Don’t Make Me Think: Common Sense Approach to Web Usability; by Steve Krug
> Writing for New Media: The Essential Guide to Writing for Interactive Media, CD-ROMs, and the Web; Andrew Bonime, Ken C. Pohlmann
> Designing Web Usability, Jakob Nielsen
> The Internet Writer’s Handbook, Martha C. Sammons
> Writing for New Media, Bonime and Pohlmann
> Labyrinths, The Art of Interactive Writing and Design, Domenic Stansberry
> Killer Content, Strategies for Web Content and E-Commerce, Mai-lan Tomsen
> Web Design in a Nutshell: A Desktop Quick Reference, Jennifer Niederst

Resources

Tools
> Dynamic Scripting Languages: ASP, PHP, ColdFusion
> Dreamweaver MX
> Dynamic link-checking: Dreamweaver/UltraDev, ColdFusion, SiteMapper.com, WebTrends.com
Bye!