# Writing for the Web: An Introduction

The web is an information medium, therefore its principal purpose is to effectively

convey information.

As users find it uncomfortable to read too much text on screens – reading about 25% slower than on paper – there are certain things you can do to make your web text more readable. Below you will find a few guidelines to getting the most out of writing content for the web, or reviewing existing content.

The last page of these guidelines is a concise list of Dos and Don’ts and it is suggested that content writers keep the list (if not the whole of this document) to hand for easy reference.

# Introduction

A typical web user arrives at a web page for key information - not mission statements, or self-promotion. They skim the page, picking out keywords, sentences, and paragraphs of interest and skipping over the parts they find less interesting. Web authors must acknowledge these facts and write accordingly.

You should use about **half the word count** on screen as you would for print materials.

# Front-load your copy

Web users are known to be impatient and critical. This means they want to visit your site and find the information they need as quickly as possible. If you don't give them the information quickly - they'll go to another website that does.

Make the key message / piece of information the first thing your user sees. Presenting the information they need up front will allow users to identify quickly what each page is about, and decide whether they want to read further or scroll to find the information they want. The first few words of the intro must not echo the headline.

We know that web users do not often read every single word on a page. We know they do not read from top to bottom, from the first word to the last. Provide obvious signposts to the key messages and chunks of content on your pages to increase their usability and effectiveness.

* Pick out keywords and phrases in bold – do not use underline as users see these as links and try to click on them
* Use headings to tell readers what larger chunks of text are about
* Use graphics as visual clues to what your content is about
* Use bullet point lists to summarise your page's content

Never put content online 'just because you can' - always question whether the information is relevant or if it should be on your website at all.

**Headings and font sizes**

The text that you see on webpages is not just used by visitors who can see the site – it is also used by screen readers which ‘speak’ the site to vision impaired users. It is a legal requirement for universities to comply with disability discrimination legislation, and to use all possible tools of web editing for this purpose. One of these tool is ‘Structured headings’, which gives a higher level of importance to your headings than regular text.

 This is the icon in the CMS editor which represents structured headings, numbered 1-6. These headings control the font size however **must not** be used for visual formatting where a heading is not appropriate. If you have a heading at the top of your text this is the only place where Heading 1 should be used, for most pages a small number of Heading 2 or possibly Heading 3 tags is sufficient – keep it simple and don’t overdo it!

Other than Headings, all text should be set at the default size, default blue and with no highlight colour. Altering these settings can impact negatively on both usability and accessibility for all users and means that site-wide changes to formatting in the stylesheets are affected. Bold and italic formatting can be used for emphasis where appropriate.

**Tables**

Tables are a useful tool for presenting information charts on your webpage, e.g. class timetables or other structured data. Tables should **never** be used for visual layout of regular text and images – they should only be used for ‘tabular’ data as below:

|  |
| --- |
| **Student Distribution by Mode of study**       |
|  | Undergraduate | Postgraduate | Total |
|  Full-time | 78% | 39% | 71% |
| Part-time | 22% | 61% | 29% |
| **Total** | 83% | 17% | 100% |

**Keywords**

Meta data (information about the page) is very important on the web to allow your webpage to be classified and found by search engines. Use relevant key words which summarise the content on your pages, but don’t overdo it – use no more than 10 keywords per page and separate phrases by commas.

You should also ensure that your page is content rich, as this will allow it to be found more easily in searches – make information explicit rather than implicit. You should use keywords where possible in all text, page titles, headings, image descriptions, link text and document / image names – all of these are considered by search engines when ranking your page!

# Avoid scrolling pages where possible

This can be done in a number of ways:

* Editing your content
* Breaking up large chunks of content into multiple pages
* Cut unnecessary content
* Link out to supporting info rather than try and cram it all into the page

Highlighting is an effective aid to scanning. But since the scanning eye can only pick up two or three words at a time, only the key ‘information-carrying’ words that symbolise the paragraph should be highlighted.

# And then?

This is the question that your user will ask every time they visit one of your pages. You should ask yourself the same question when you are creating the content for the page: what can they do with the information you have given them? What actions will they need to take now? Make sure you provide the answers.

Don't tell your user that they will need to fill in a form to get something done. The web is an interactive medium, so users expect to be able to ‘do things’ with the content you present them. Tell them where to find the form (provide a link), what details they will need to provide, who they will need to send it to (give contact details), by when and what to expect when they've done this.

The most important thing you can do is to put yourself in the place of the reader.

**What are your users looking for?**

Users can arrive at any of your web pages from any reference source. They have probably not read all your content in sequence, so each page must be self explanatory. Link to background or explanatory information to help users. but don’t overdo it – it is not necessary to link to all pages in the same section if this is already apparent from the navigation, for example. **Keep it simple.**

# The Ten Principles of Clear Writing

These ten principles are the standard by which clear writing is judged. It is recommended that that they are applied to all text intended for web publication.

1. Keep sentences short (average length about **twelve** words)

2. Prefer the simple to the complex

3. Prefer the familiar word

4. Avoid unnecessary words, e.g. superfluous adjectives and adverbs

5. Use active rather than passive verbs

6. Write as you would talk

7. Use terms the reader can picture

8. Tie in with the reader’s experience

9. Make full use of variety

10. Write to express not impress

You have to work to earn the user's trust, which is rapidly lost if you use exaggerated claims or overly boastful language; avoid "marketese" in favour of a more objective style. This also allows the user to cut straight to the information they need, in turn giving a feeling of satisfaction with the site.

DO NOT USE FULL CAPS FOR TEXT OR TITLES! It is the electronic equivalent of shouting. Similarly, in most cases one exclamation mark is sufficient.

Don’t use @ in text, this should only be used in email addresses.

**Jargon busting**

Don’t assume that all readers are familiar with your working practices and terminology. Use plain English to prevent user annoyance of having to read a whole page before working out whether it relates to them or not.

Puns and metaphors do not work for international audiences.

Try to use the same terms and phrases in your content as your readers use when they talk or write about the subject matter in question. This will make your pages easier to understand for the user and have a higher chance of being picked up in searches.

E.g. refer to graduations rather than degree ceremonies, courses rather than programmes of study.

**Abbreviations**

Some acronyms or abbreviations are so common that they have entered the language and needn’t be spelt out, for example NATO, AIDS, MP.

However be aware that visitors to your website will not be familiar to abbreviations which are common use within Edinburgh Napier, for example JKCC or FECCI.

NEVER use apostrophes in the plural: It is many PCs, not PC’s!

# Hyperlinks

Most webpages will have close relationships with other Edinburgh Napier or external institution sites, they do not tend to stand alone. Hyperlinks are useful to direct the user to other information which supports your topic, or to the places they should visit next to carry out some tasks.

Descriptive hyperlink text can be used to represent where the user will go when they leave your page, e.g.

‘Complete an  [application form](NULL) and return by post to…’

Do not use ‘click here’ as a hyperlink. When using a screen reader, hyperlink text is converted to speech and reads only the words used for the link. Therefore using ‘click here’ will not give any indication of where the link goes – instead use descriptive text for all links.

In addition, search engines use hyperlink text to categorise websites - so hyperlinked keywords work for you to help rank your site.

When linking to an internal (Edinburgh Napier) page, the new content should load in the same window. When linking to an external (non-Edinburgh Napier) site, the link should load in a new window.

When giving direct URLs on your page, do not include http:// or trailing slashes, i.e.:

[www.google.com](http://www.google.com) not

<http://www.google.com/>

If you are linking to a document, always check the ‘Display link with icon’ option. This will insert a small image on to the page representing the file type of the document you are linking to, giving the user a clue that they will be downloading a file and will have to wait for the program to open before they can see it. The icons currently available in the system are:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| icon_pdf  | PDF |
| icdoc  | Word document |
| icdotx  | Word template |
| icxls  | Excel spreadsheet |
| icppt  | PowerPoint presentation |

**Vocabulary**

Online not on-line

Email not e-mail

Website and webpage, not web-site and web-page or web site and web page

There is much debate about this issue from several different schools of thought. The English language is evolving, and to present Edinburgh Napier as a modern University we should use the most common / up-to-date terminology available (as above).

degree, trimester, school, faculty, undergraduate and postgraduate never have capital letters except where being used as ‘School / Faculty of…’, and the latter 2 are never abbreviated to ug / pg or contain hyphens.

# Numbers

Write numbers with digits, not letters (23, not twenty-three).

Do this for big numbers up to one million: 900,000 is better than 900 thousand, but 2 million is better than 2,000,000 for clarity on screen.

Spell out numbers that don't represent specific facts, for example ‘thousands of visitors enjoy the Edinburgh Festivals every year’. It's better to write "thousands" as a word than to write "1,000s" here, as it represents scope rather than data.

If you were stating the exact number you should use digits (e.g., "1,059 of our students come from overseas"). Disclosing the exact number increases the statement's credibility.

To avoid confusion, insert commas to numbers with four or more figures, as 7,642 or 6,345,789.

**Dates**

Where dates are specified, you should use a number plus the relevant extension (st, th, rd) to differentiate your dates from other types of numbers. As mentioned above, screen users do not read a page from start to finish, therefore this will assist them in finding the pertinent information as easily as possible.

**Times**

Don’t use the 24-hour clock - use 9am, 2pm and 12 noon.

A full stop is used to separate hours and minutes i.e. 12.30pm not 12:30pm.

When writing a time range, am or pm should be specified for both times, and separated by spaces and a dash, i.e. 11am – 2pm.

**Phone numbers**

Always use the most complete phone number possible, i.e. including the Edinburgh dialling code. When writing pages specifically targeted at international students also include the country code i.e. (+44).

# Credibility

Credibility is lost with factual errors, spelling mistakes, poor grammar and incorrect use of apostrophes. Avoidable errors in any of these matters give doubts about the credibility of the whole site.

Pages should not be signed with an email signature, although relevant contact details (email / telephone / room number) should be added where appropriate. All communications are coming from Edinburgh Napier as an institution. Quotes, references, and good quality links all add to credibility.

SPELL CHECK YOUR WORK, AND ASK SOMEBODY ELSE TO PROOF READ FOR ERRORS.

Check that links work! They are a vital part of your content.

# Humour

Compared to print, the Web is an informal and immediate medium and users appreciate a small amount of humour. Some amount of personality (the voice of the author) makes the page more attractive.

# Housekeeping

The Web is a fluid medium: update pages as time goes by to reflect all changes.

Statistics, numbers, and examples all need to be recent or user trust in your site suffers, for example different information should be conveyed before an event and after it.

Use the ‘Review’ and ‘Expiry’ functions when creating new pages to alert yourself to these.

All content has a sell-by date – build it into your workflow to regularly monitor your site for out of date content.

# Video

Video clips on your website are a nice way to interact with the user in a way that is not possible through the print medium. Video templates where you can also embed text are provided in order to deliver this in the most user friendly way to your site visitors, by streaming the clips (i.e. using Edinburgh Napier’s server resources) rather than making users download large files. Please contact the Marketing & Communications web team if you wish to use video on your webpages and they will be happy to advise.

# In summary: web writing Dos and Don'ts

Do:

* Keep the text on your pages short and concise. You should aim for at least 50% fewer words than you would use in print.
* State the obvious. If you want the user to click a link to go to a particular page or piece of information, the link should say 'click here to go to [a particular page or piece on information]', not just 'click here' or be a word highlighted in a paragraph of text.
* Tell the user what they need to know first. Then tell them the rest.
* Identify your key messages. What do you want the user to do with/find out from this page? Make this the most obvious part of your content.
* And then? Ask yourself this at the end of every page. Where do you want the user to go from here? Can they get there? Is it obvious how?
* Use images. Pages of just text are dull, intimidating and inaccessible. Let's face it, who can be bothered reading web pages? Show me the pictures.
* Use bullet points. These make it easier for your skim reading user to pick out key facts/messages.
* Use sub-headings, in bold.

Don't:

* Use the same text you used in your printed material: use these guidelines to make a web-friendly version.
* Use the same text you used on your old website.
* Use the same text you used last year.
* Use PDF or a WORD document because you can't be bothered making a new web page.
* Write 'Welcome to Edinburgh Napier University’s blah blah blah department' as the first line of your homepage. Your user knows they're on the Edinburgh Napier University site, they probably clicked on a link to your specific page and if the title of the page doesn't tell them where they are, it should do.
* Make links very long. Explain what the user is linking to and then let them link to it to get the information.
* Write in a flowery/journalistic/conversational/marketing style. Just write clearly and deliver the facts.
* Forget about your pages. Make sure you regularly read through your website and remove/update any information that is out of date or no longer relevant or accurate.

# References

<http://www.ncl.ac.uk/web-development/>

<http://www.sun.com/980713/webwriting/>

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