



Writing for the Web (Merrimack College Web Services)

Most People Scan Websites

Think of how you read online. Are you reading every word from the top all the way to the bottom? Probably not. People scan. They skip around. They skim headlines. They are looking for quick answers.

Most people are scanners.

But wait... there are *some* people who want to read everything. They want depth. **A small number of people are sponges.**

Write for Both Scanners and Sponges

Put the most important information in your first paragraph. Use the inverted pyramid. If someone reads the first paragraph on your page they will understand the big picture.

- Write clear, obvious headlines. Use H2...H3...H4 and so on.
- Use bullets in lieu of wordy paragraphs.
- Use hidden/collapsible content like accordions and tabs for more in-depth info.
- Make content trustworthy with use of citations and quotes from students/experts.
- Ensure that every webpage has titles, meta data and tags.

Fight the Need to Appear Clever and Smart

We are taught in school to write long term papers with pages of examples and evidence. Our audience is a professor who already knows a lot about that particular subject. We use big words to appear smart and clever. This is not how to write for the web.

Remember:

- You are not writing for a professor or a boss.
- You are writing for a diverse audience with different levels of education.
- Your audience doesn't care if you sound smart or clever.
- Your audience is hunting for a quick answer. Picture them as bloodhounds.
- Use familiar words that tell them if they are in the right place to get their answer.
- Make your content obvious and self-explanatory.

Just Say No to Academic Jargon

An 18-year-old prospective student doesn't want to read dense paragraphs of jargon and academic mumbo jumbo.

- “We are committed to academic excellence.” Say what? Use examples of how.
- “Our school has a prestigious reputation and provides unmatched quality to its students.” Huh?

Show rather than tell. Use concrete examples. Talk about the program’s awards. Get specific about career advancement. Share job success and salary ranges after graduation. Offer student testimonials.

Make Your Headlines Obvious

- Headlines are scanned and should tell the reader what info is below.
- Stop using puns or cute or clever words in headlines. It confuses people, especially foreign students unfamiliar with colloquialisms.
- Put your keywords at the beginning.
- Headlines should work out of context.
 - “Social Justice Degree Teaches Compassion” makes more sense on its own than “Fighting for the Less Fortunate”
- Use questions with pronouns in headlines.
 - “How Do I” is about tasks and procedures.
 - “Can I” is about policies.

The Tone of Your Website Should be Conversational and Enthusiastic

Use a casual, conversational, upbeat tone. Be friendly but not funny. But beware - don’t be too playful or chummy because it can undermine your site’s credibility and professionalism.

Stop using third person. Students, applicants and parents are “you” and the college is “we.”

Use active voice instead of passive voice. “Meghan ate Doritos” is active while “The Doritos were eaten by Meghan” is passive.

Tips for Using Bulleted Lists

Remember that most people won’t read dense writing on a web page. Bullet points should reduce wordiness, attract the eye and break down complex ideas.

- Each line should be a similar length.
- Each line should be structured the same way.
 - If you use nouns in line one, for example, use the same noun structure for all.
- Only use numbered lists if the sequence is essential.
- The lead-in – words used right before a bulleted list – should be clear and set up the list.
- Fragments don’t have punctuation/caps. Full sentences have punctuation/caps.
- While bullet points are your friend, use in moderation or they are no longer effective.

Chunk Your Paragraphs

Most paragraphs should be between 300 and 700 words. If you go over 700 words, think about cutting the content down. If you can’t, create more sections, use collapsible content or link out to other pages.

- Chunk it up - only one topic per paragraph.
- Put the most important content in the first paragraph.
- Use bulleted lists over paragraphs when you can.
- Use bolding and italics – but don't go crazy or it defeats the purpose.
- A page needs at least one paragraph of content.
- Each page should have a call to action showing people where to go next.

People Land on Your Pages from Many Different Sources

Web copy on all pages should point the audience back to major content areas. Use related links on all pages and breadcrumbs.

Use Visual Elements on Your Pages

- Use callout bars, quote bubbles, infographics, testimonials and videos with descriptions.
- Highlight key numbers/fast facts and make them easy to scan.
- Choose 10 or 12 point font | black font on white | highly legible sans serif
- Create pages that scroll - three or four scrolls of content is plenty.
- Don't capitalize all letters in headlines.
- Don't use the link color in other areas of the site, like headlines.
- Only underline links.
- Use italics sparingly.
- Lines of texts should be medium length.
- Watch out for false bottoms where it looks like the page ends but doesn't.

Don't Use "Click Here" Link Labels

- "Click here" links are pointless. It confuses search engines and is not helpful to people with disabilities using screen readers.
- Write your sentence and link the word or words that describe the content you are linking to.
- Use one to five words.

How to Convert Your Print Document Into a Web Friendly Page

- Cut down the length – a webpage should be HALF the length of a print document.
- Replace paragraphs of text with bullets when you can.
- Add clear headings and subheadings. Now is not the time to be quippy.
- Determine the keywords of the document and use them.
- Make your 11th grade english teacher mad – start some sentences with And, Or, But
- Create a pdf of the full document and post it on the page too for sponges.
- Use collapsible content like accordions and tabs for secondary, in-depth info.