

Writing for the Web

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Difference Between Paper and Online Presentation

In print, your document forms a whole and the user is focused on the entire set of information. On the Web, you need to **split each document** into multiple hyperlinked pages since users are not willing to read long pages.

Users can **enter a site at any page** and move between pages as they chose, so make every page independent and explain its topic without assumptions about the previous page seen by the user.

Link to background or explanatory information to help users who do not have the necessary knowledge to understand or use the page.

Make the word count for the online version of a given topic about **half the word count** used when writing for print: Users find it painful to read too much text on screens, and they **read about 25 percent more slowly** from screens than from paper.

Users don't like to scroll through masses of text, so put the most important information at the top.

Web users are impatient and critical: They have not chosen your site because you are great but because they have something they need to do. Write in the "news you can use" style to allow users to quickly find the information they want.

Credibility is important on the Web where users connect to unknown servers at remote locations. 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 favor of a more objective style.

A few hyperlinks to other sites with supporting information increase the credibility of your pages. If at all possible, **link quotes** from magazine reviews and other articles to the source.

The Web is an informal and immediate medium, compared to print, so users appreciate a somewhat informal writing style and small amounts of humor.

Do *not* use clever or cute headings since users rely on scanning to pick up the meaning of the text.

Limit the use of metaphors, particularly in headings: Users might take you literally.

Use **simple sentence structures**: Convoluted writing and complex words are even harder to understand online.

Puns do not work for international users; find some other way to be humorous.

Add bylines and other ways of communicating some of your personality. (This also increases credibility.)

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 credibility suffers.

For example: Before a conference, the page about the event might point to a registration form; afterward, point to slides or presentation transcripts instead.

Working With a Designer

If you need artwork, set up a meeting with the designer to deliver a rough sketch of the proposed artwork.

SOME GENERAL WEB GRAPHIC GUIDELINES CAN IMPROVE READABILITY

Limit the use of graphics, particularly full-page graphics. The time it takes to load such images can frustrate many of your users.

Include **flowcharts and process diagrams** and unique captions identifying them.

Use **screen captures** if they can help the user understand how a product works.

Add a **caption or an explanatory note** that a screen is the result of a user action, if it is unclear that the graphic is not interactive.

WEB DESIGN REFERENCES

Guide to Web Style. "Graphics."

Scannability

Seventy-nine percent of Web users **scan pages; they do not read word-by-word**.

Design your web document to be scannable:

To make keywords stand out, use **highlighting liberally**: Highlight about three times as many words as you would when writing for print.

Use the tag rather than the tag for **keyword highlighting**. Since **STRONG** is usually rendered as boldface, this is typically the best way to highlight words.

Colored text or colored backgrounds can also be used for highlighting, but don't use blue for words. That color is reserved for hyperlinks.

The **hyperlinks** also stand out by virtue of being colored, so they should be written to do double duty as highlighted keywords.

Highlight only **key information-carrying words**. Avoid highlighting entire sentences or long phrases since a scanning eye can only pick up two (or at most three) words at a time.

Highlight words that **differentiate your page from other pages** and words that symbolize what a given paragraph is about (for example, do *not* highlight the word "Sun" when writing for the Sun Web site since *all* the pages are about Sun.)

The tag is usually rendered as italics and can be used to make figure captions or emphasized sentences or phrases stand out. Do not use it for large blocks of text, since italic typefaces are slower to read online.

Bulleted and numbered lists slow down the scanning eye and can draw attention to important points.

Each paragraph should contain one main idea; use a second paragraph for a second idea, since users tend to skip any second point as they scan over the paragraph.

Start the page with the conclusion as well as a short summary of the remaining contents ("inverted pyramid" style).

Navigation

Navigating a **web document** differs from navigating the Web. A web document fits within one or more web pages and covers a **focused topic**. The web page is the unit displayed to the user and can contain one or more web documents (as well as other web elements).

NAVIGATING DOCUMENTS

When writing a document for the Web, use links to guide the reader through the document. Think of "**linking**" as the **quickest means to get the user to the most relevant information**. Whenever possible, state conclusions and link to supporting details; enumerate categories and link to lists; summarize and link to full-length treatments. This allows the user to scan the contents of a page and select relevant and useful information.

Links embedded in a document are the primary links that you want a reader to see; since readers use **links as guideposts in scanning**, you want to use them correctly and write in a way that takes best advantage of them. Only the most pertinent should be "part" of the document. Don't let links become a distraction. Position less relevant, but meaningful links of additional information in the web page's margin or at the end of the document under a "See Also" label.

NAVIGATING THE WEB

If a link takes the user "outside" the document, then its purpose is to navigate the Web site (or direct the reader to a third-party web site). Whenever possible, links such as these should guide the user to additional information that is directly connected--not only to the topic of the document, but to the topic of the paragraph or section being read.

Writing to Be Read

Part of web page design includes the consistent use of textual elements. These guidelines will improve readability:

HEADS: Make the **topmost head** on the page an H1, worded so that the user knows **why the page is important**.

Make sure that heads clearly indicate the content of the sections.

Avoid in-line character formatting to heads--the results are unpredictable, varying from browser to browser.

Organize your text so that the **hierarchy** is no deeper than four levels. Lower-level heads are hard to distinguish and disorienting to online readers.

- LISTS:** You can include a **greater number of lists** on a web page than on a printed paper page.
- Use numbered lists when the order of entries is important.
- Use unnumbered lists whenever the sequence of the entries is not important.
- Limit the number of items in a single list to no more than nine.
- Generally, limit lists to no more than two levels: primary and secondary.
- CAPTIONS:** Make sure that the caption **uniquely identifies the illustration or table**. For example, do not give the same name to the caption as you have given to a head on the same page or another page.
- Caption illustrations except when the context is so clear that captions would be redundant.
- Don't number illustrations sequentially by chapter, section, or the like. If a screen capture has more than one illustration to which you must refer, use a **simple numbering scheme** (Figure 1, Figure 2). If you follow the "one topic per screen" guideline, however, **figure numbers usually won't be necessary**.
- Don't include figure captions unless you need them or have a lot of conceptual or reference material.
- HYPERLINKS:** Don't use a hypertext link if the information can be succinctly presented on the current page.
- Don't mention that you are providing links at all.
- Use a **description of the information to be found in the link**, or perhaps the link address.
- Use hyperlinks to provide **supplemental information** like definitions of terms and abbreviations, reference information, and background reading.
- Cluster cross-references under a **"See also"** (or similar) heading where appropriate. Generally, such lists of cross-references are easiest to read if they include only headings or titles with a few words of explanation.

Writing to Be Found

More than half of web users rely on **search engines** to navigate pages.

When users link to a page from a search engine, they should **know immediately how the page relates to their query**. Highlight keywords, start the page with a summary, and follow the guidelines listed under "Scannability".

Include in each page all possible query terms that can be used to search for the topic of the page. List the most important terms in a **keywords meta-tag** together with all common **synonyms** (even ones not included in the body text). Include generic terms

used by customers or competing companies to describe the topic of the page; do not include competitors' trademarks in the meta-tag.

```
Syntax: <META name="keywords" content="Solaris 2.6,
upgrade requirements, operating system versions">
```

Use a **controlled vocabulary** to add keywords to the meta-tags for your pages: Create a list of common terms for your subject area and make sure that each of these terms is added to the keywords meta-tag for those related pages.

Do not add a keyword if the page is only peripherally related to the term. **Only use keywords that describe the main topic of a page.**

Each page must have a <TITLE> tag.

Create **title text** of a single line, typically no more than 60 characters. Make sure that the first 40 characters of the title describe the topic of the page: titles are often truncated in navigation menus and by search engines.

Make the **first word of the title** the most important descriptor of the page: Users often scan down long lists of titles to choose pages.

Do not begin a title with a generic term ("Welcome to") or an article ("The").

The title should make sense when **viewed completely out of context**, as part of a long list of other page titles.

Give **different titles to different pages**: Pages about the same topic can start with the same words but should end with words that explain the difference between them.

Titles can contain no markup or highlighting.

Titles must be written in mixed case.

In rare cases, a single keyword might be emphasized by use of UPPERCASE (do not use for the first word in the title: being first is sufficient emphasis).

Each page should have a short **summary** in a description meta-tag. This summary is shown below the page title by some search engines.

Descriptions must be 150 characters or less.

Descriptions must make sense when read **completely out of context** of the site (though you can assume that they will be seen together with the page title).

Descriptions should tell users what the page is about and allow them to judge whether it is of relevance to their current problem.

Do not fill descriptions with hyperbole or promotional language; concentrate on the facts.

```
Syntax: <META name="description" content="How to upgrade
from Solaris 2.5 to Solaris 2.6: system requirements,
where to buy, link to online download.">
```

Terms to Avoid

Writing well for the Web means taking advantage of the options the Web offers, but at the same time, **not calling attention to the Web**. "Click here," "follow this link," and "this Web site" are just a few self-referential terms to avoid.

Generally, if the words or phrases are **specific to Web use**, then they are probably **words to avoid**. A good test of web-term overuse is to print the page out, read it, and ask yourself if it makes as much sense on paper as it does on screen.

You can't eliminate all references to the Web, especially when giving browser-related instructions. However, a common error to beware of is assuming that everyone reading the page uses the same browser. For instance, instructions on how to download a file are different from browser to browser. Make sure that your instructions are detailed enough to be understood without being specific to browser version or brand of browser.

Editorial Review of Web Pages

An editor can help you **polish the content of your web pages** before you release them to the rest of the world by improving the grammar, punctuation, and consistency, and by making content suggestions.

The editor can also serve as your **usability tester**, so be sure to create a list of any aspects of your web page design or content for which you particularly need feedback. (You can provide this information in the appropriate area of the editing request form, listed in "Editing References.")

To schedule editing, submit a **hard-copy version** of your web pages for the editorial review along with the completed editing request form. Or, provide the URL and the completed electronic editing request. A hard-copy edit decreases the likelihood that questionable corrections will be made to the electronic file. The paper version also gives you a handwritten record of the changes.

USAGE REFERENCES

For more information on writing style conventions, see the following:

The Chicago Manual of Style. 14th ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.

Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary. 10th ed. Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster, 1994.

The Random House Dictionary of the English Language. 2d ed. New York: Random House, 1987.

Web Facts

79% of users always scan; only 16% read word-by-word

Reading from computer screens is 25% slower than from paper

Web content should be **50% the size** of its paper equivalent

White Papers re-written according to these guidelines have shown **significant improvements in all metrics**:

Task Time:	180% faster
User Error:	809% fewer
Memory:	100% more
Subjective satisfaction:	37% higher
Overall usability:	159% better