

Writing for the Web

If you are not in the habit of writing, you may be a little intimidated by the idea of putting your thoughts into writing. Remember high school composition classes? Probably not, but that's okay. This chapter takes you through what you should know to communicate well in writing for digital, nonsequential reading.

If you are in the habit of writing, you may still need some guidance. Business, academic, or government writing doesn't always carry over to the Web with its passive voice — for example, *mistakes were made*. This chapter gives you guidelines you can apply to your writing style to make it more readable on your Web pages.

Designing for Quick Scanning

Most visitors who come to your page won't actually read all the text. You should expect this. Don't let it hurt your feelings. If you know people won't actually read much of your prose, then you can write with this in mind. So, if visitors don't read your pages, what do they do there? They scan them, looking for specific information.

Cross-
Reference

Chapter 33 has a lot of information on design. You may want to jump there after you finish this chapter!

Can you make your pages easier to scan? Yes. Some of the design ideas discussed in Chapter 33 can help. What follows is a set of guidelines that overlaps with the design ideas from Chapter 33. Most of the design ideas of Chapter 33 relate to designing the shell pages. This chapter addresses what you actually put into your terminal pages, your Welcome Page, and, to some degree, your links pages (when they have prose).



In This Chapter

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Writing concisely

Writing vividly

Checking spelling and proofreading



Here are some basic guidelines to consider:

- ♦ **White space.** You've heard it before, you'll hear it again. White space draws the eye. Chapter 33 recommends that white space play prominently into your design. White space should also play prominently in your page layout. Separate paragraphs of text adequately with white space. Leave plenty of white space around headings and images.
- ♦ **Use lots of headings.** Headings are valuable to visitors because they give visitors the first clue they have found the right page and the information they need is contained on it.
- ♦ **Wrap text to create a visual flow.** You can do interesting things with text flow both around images and around white space (or what looks to be white space) that help make your point. When you add an image to your page, whether or not the text wraps around the image makes a difference in how people perceive it. Try it both ways (text wrapped around image and text not wrapped around image) and see which seems more effective for your application.
- ♦ **Keep paragraphs short.** This means several things. You have to limit the amount you say about any one thing and organize the material you include, and then you leave room for more white space. All these things are good for your visitors.
- ♦ **Use bulleted lists.** Bulleted lists are often the first place the eye goes. People remember items displayed in lists better than the same items comma-delimited in a paragraph. Why do you suppose this book uses so many bulleted lists?
- ♦ **Use numbered lists.** Especially when you are informing your reader of things that happen in a particular sequence, numbered lists are effective in drawing the eye. Try using the technique used in this book. Begin each list item with the short version in bold and then explain it further as part of the same list item. This makes for especially easy scanning.
- ♦ **Include graphics when appropriate.** You should consider removing unnecessary graphics from your design to make download times shorter. Graphics as part of your content (as opposed to part of your design) are another story. If a diagram is more effective at communicating your message than words, include it. Remember, different people learn differently. Some people would rather see the picture than read the text. Include both so you don't exclude anyone.
- ♦ **Use hypertext to define terms.** Take advantage of the power of hypertext. Define your terms either elsewhere in your same page or on another page. That a hypertext link is underlined and a different color than the rest of the text also draws the eye to the term. This helps readers by keeping the text shorter and making scanning easier.

Writing Concisely

You've done everything you can to make your site easy to scan. Visitors can find what they want. And what they want is in a short paragraph. But you can do more. Consider the following two paragraphs (underlined text represents hyperlinks):

All Over the Web services make use of the latest security technologies, including Secure-sockets layer (SSL), which allows all transactions to be encrypted so that only you and the server know what you're sending, which should give you peace of mind to know that no one lurking on the Web can read your private information. Additionally, your own site visitors, who are just as concerned about the privacy and security of their own personal information, will feel more comfortable entering their own personal information into your guestbook when they see that your guestbook is administered by Over the Web.

Or

Over the Web employs SSL, the latest security technology available, to guarantee all transactions with our secure server are indecipherable to hackers lurking on the Web. Your private information stays private.

Visitors to your site, wisely concerned about their own privacy, will have confidence their personal data is in good hands when they see Over the Web administers your guestbook. And this gives them confidence in you.

Active verbs

Active verbs make your writing more interesting to read. Between “extensive customization is supported by Stay in Touch” and “Stay in Touch supports extensive customization,” which reads better? The second example makes use of an active verb. The first example uses the passive voice, where the subject of the verb is either missing or an inanimate object. Take responsibility for the action. People don't speak in the passive voice — unless they're in politics and they've done something wrong — and you shouldn't write in it.

Active verbs also give you more of a sense of action. Consider the following examples:

<i>Active verbs</i>	<i>Passive verbs</i>
Pollution endangers the native wildlife	The native wildlife is endangered by pollution.
Our product performs calculations like nothing else on the market.	Calculations are performed by our product like nothing else on the market.
Your donation can save the life of a hungry child.	The life of a hungry child can be saved by your donation.

Active verbs are simply more compelling.

Subordination

Your sentence usually has a main point and then there may be some relevant, ancillary data, which is outside the main point. Without resorting to diagramming sentences (remember that from the 7th grade?), you should be able to find the main point by finding the verb, the subject of the verb, and the object of the verb. An example helps:

A bomb, the third in as many years, damaged the Church of St. George in the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate in Istanbul and seriously injured one priest (he's still recovering).

What is the verb? What is the subject? What is the object of the verb? All the other words are part of the ancillary information. The verbs are (trick question) *damaged* and *injured*. The subject of both verbs is *a bomb*. The objects of the verbs are *the Church* and *one priest*. Everything else in the sentence is either part of a prepositional phrase, an appositive, or a parenthetical.

Subordination is the process of deciding what the main point is and moving the rest of the sentence either into another sentence or into a subordinate clause. Subordinate clauses often begin with *that*, *which*, or *who*.

Parentheticals

You've seen a lot of these in this book. In fact, one occurs in the last paragraph. A parenthetical is something you insert in parentheses. At least three good reasons exist to use parentheticals:

1. To give your opinion in a sentence that is otherwise fact.
2. To interject tangentially related information.
3. To include details about the preceding word.

Appositives

People use appositives when they talk:

I ran into Chuck, that designer I told you about from the Neon Guild, today at the mall. He said he did have Windows NT server experience.

That designer I told you about from the Neon Guild is the appositive. Appositives directly follow the noun they modify; an appositive is preceded and followed by a comma.

Expletives

Even though writing for the Web can be quasi-conversational, expletives may be out of place, depending on your audience. Instead, use exclamations and italics to make a point:

This particular beta software is nowhere ready for production. After installing my operating system for the *third* time, all I could say was: “*what a complete waste of time!*”

Expletives may work in conversations in the movies, but they may bring down the quality of your Web pages immeasurably.

Sentence length

Given a choice, shorter sentences are better than longer ones. As much as possible, break up your sentences. If you must use long sentences at times, make sure the preceding and following sentences are short. See if you can break up your long sentence with lists or with subordination. Shorter sentences require less concentration to be understood. What you really want to avoid is sentences that are so long that they span several lines.

Write Vividly

Writing vividly involves selecting the most appropriate and powerful words and omitting any unnecessary words. If you think your vocabulary isn't that strong, get a thesaurus. Consider the following sentence. What can you do to clean it up, given the suggestions in this chapter?

This product manufactured by ABC is unlike any others on the market in that it removes spots from wool, cotton, and other natural fibers, melts ice even on the coldest days, protects your bathroom enamel from hard water marks caused by calcium and iron, and can be delivered directly to your door in one-gallon jugs overnight.

First, the comma-delimited list goes into a bullet list. Notice the last item isn't really a feature of the product, but information about distribution; that'll go into its own sentence. Also, *This product* isn't very vivid; use the product's name. *Unlike any others on the market* translates to unique. What does *in that* it add? Finally, *manufactured by ABC* should be moved into an appositive or into the sentence about distribution. So, we have:

Toxic-toner, manufactured by ABC,

- **removes spots** from cotton, wool, and other natural fibers
- **melts ice** even on the coldest days
- **protects** your bathroom enamel from hard water marks caused by calcium and iron

This unique product can be delivered overnight to your door; it is available in convenient one-gallon jugs.

Check Spelling and Proofreading

It seems so obvious, but you do need to edit your page. Just as you put your HTML through a validator, you need to put your text through a spelling checker. Then have it carefully reviewed by someone with a good command of the language to make sure all your verbs agree with your nouns, your references make sense, and that generally it is readable. It's difficult to edit your own material. You're familiar with what you meant to say, and you may gloss over errors by subconsciously filling in the blanks. Get someone else to go over your page after you've checked it yourself.

The editor you have been using up to this point, either SimpleText or Notepad, doesn't have a spelling checker. All the HTML-editors reviewed in Chapter 8 do have one. If you are serious about developing Web pages, you'll want to find an editor with a spelling checker. Start looking around the Web. Many pages have misspelled words. We wouldn't mention this problem if it didn't happen a lot!

From Here



Jump to Part III: "Developing Document Structure with HTML 4."

If you haven't already done so, see Chapter 8 and select your HTML editor.

Summary

Writing for the Web is different from most of the writing you do in other professions. You need to make sure the page can be easily scanned because most people looking at your pages are looking for something in particular. You can use white space, short paragraphs, lists, lots of headings, hypertext, and graphics to make your page more easily scanned. You also want to make sure your sentences are vividly written, using just the right words (but not too many). Finally, you want to take that extra minute or two after you think you are done writing your page to edit it carefully and run it through a spelling checker. Another set of eyes also helps. Embarrassing typos are completely avoidable.

