



Write It Right

Websites are among the TA&D network's most valuable ways of disseminating information. So it really pays to craft your content in keeping with what we know about how people *read* on the web.

How People Read on the Web

People aren't going to read all the lovely content you've written. Sorry! The truth is, they're going to skim and scan it, looking for something (a keyword, a header perhaps?) that catches their attention or matches the reason they're visiting your website in the first place.¹ Here are 5 quick findings of research about how people read on the web.

Users look most above the fold

- Web users spend **80% of their time** looking at information **above the page fold** (meaning, the part of the webpage that's visible when users first land there). Although users do scroll, they allocate only 20% of their attention below the fold.²
- Users spend 69% of their time looking at the **left half of the webpage** and 30% viewing the right half.³

Users scan and skim web content

- Web users take the time to read little more than **20% of the words** on a webpage during an average visit.⁴
- "Scanning text is an extremely common behavior for higher-literacy users."⁵
- Lower-literacy users "plow text" rather than scan it.⁶

Credibility matters

Credibility of the website is important to visitors. They want to know that the information offered is accurate and objective. They ignore any page that sounds or looks like an ad. Exaggerations, boasts, and "marketing" hype also turn visitors off—and cause them to leave.

And no wonder. As the noted web researcher Jakob Nielsen says, "Web users are busy; they want to get the straight facts."⁷

Implications for Content Writers

- Put the most important content first, in the opening sentences and paragraphs.
- Get to the point. Immediately.
- Users are much more likely to scroll past the fold if the first content they see captures their attention or matches their need.
- Don't center text. Readers strongly prefer the left margin area and won't even see centered text.
- Keep headers (and links) flush to the left margin, where visitors can readily see them.

Implications for Content Writers

- Make webpage text easy for users to scan.
- Use bolded headings and subheadings that make sense and include keywords of the content.
- Use bulleted lists when you can to break up content. Bullets are also easy to scan.

Implications for Content Writers

- Write in *plain language* that's stripped of big claims or promises you can't keep.
- Use objective, non-biased language. Avoid "loaded" words that spark strong emotions or indicate your particular viewpoint or opinion.
- Offer an "About Us" section that says who you are, what you do, and what services or products you offer to visitors to your site.
- Include a tagline on your home page that summarizes what you do.

Example: Here's a sampling of taglines from around the TA&D network...

- **CADRE** | Encouraging the use of mediation and other collaborative strategies to resolve disagreements about special education and early intervention programs
- **PEPNet** | To increase the educational, career and lifetime choices available to individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing
- **Reading Rockets** | Teaching kids to read and helping those who struggle
- **NCIPP** | Your source for induction and mentoring in special education

These taglines make it instantly clear what the mission of the project is. Visitors get a quick “read” on who and what we are and what we’re up to, with taglines like these.

Images need to deliver content messages or they’re ignored

Eye-tracking studies have also shown how web visitors react to graphics such as photos or diagrams.

- They pay close attention to **images that deliver content messages**, such as photos of a product or of a real person (as opposed to a stock photo of a model).
- They completely ignore “feel-good,” “fluff,” and non-information-carrying photos and graphics.⁸

Implications for Content Writers

While pleasing pictures can definitely spruce up our websites, they also take up valuable real-estate on the page.

- Use images to carry content or illustrate the points you’re making.
- Make sure you include **alt tags** describing the image well, so that visitors with screen readers can also benefit from the graphic.

Visitors like standard web features

Web users rely on consistent and **predictable placement of standard website features**, including:

- the search box in the upper right hand corner
- features like “About Us” or “Contact Us”
- links that change color after the user has visited the link
- your company’s logo in the upper left corner
- no splash pages
- a breadcrumb trail that shows them where they are in your site (and which lets them get “home” with a click)
- a site map⁹

Implications for Content Writers

Look at your own website. Is there a search box where people can enter a term and run a search of your content? Is it located in the upper right-hand corner?

How about the other elements mentioned—an About Us page? A page that tells folks how to contact you? Do your links change color when they’ve been visited?

Streamline Your Content for Web Reading

Now that we’ve covered the high points of how readers read on the web, let’s explore how content can be crafted to streamline people’s search for the information they need, including these 4 strategies:

1. Help readers skim and scan
2. Put your essential message first
3. Chunk your content
4. Write plainly

1. Help readers skim and scan

Given that people don’t read much on the web but skim and scan instead, it’s important to create webpages that are easy to scan.¹⁰ The tips below can help you do just that.

Include a table of contents

Start webpages (especially longer ones) with a table of contents. This gives readers a quick **snapshot of the content** they're going to find on that page. The items in the table of contents should match the major headings or sections of the page and be linked to those sections, so that users can "rappel like rock climbers down the text."¹¹

State the most important information in the first two paragraphs

State the essential message of the page first, right off the bat. Immediately. In the first two paragraphs. Giving such a quick overview of the content helps the reader get the point of a page instantly.¹²

Chunk content in short paragraphs

Short and concise paragraphs are easier to scan—and, importantly, they get twice as many eye fixations as long paragraphs.¹³ Web users also pay more attention to the first words in a sentence and to the first and last sentences in a paragraph. So put keywords or **information-carrying words first**, where they'll catch the eye.

How short is short? Less than 100 words seems to be the conventional wisdom on how long web paragraphs should be. The content will drive how you chunk the information. Cut out what's unnecessary to getting your point across. Start a new paragraph when you find yourself veering away from the one single point of the paragraph.¹⁴

Put only one main idea in a paragraph

Rule of thumb from eye-tracking studies: Limit each paragraph to one main idea. **Front load your message at the beginning** of the paragraph, where it's more likely to be seen.¹⁵

Use bold headings and subheadings

Headings and subheadings are one of the main ways that web readers skim the page for content of interest.¹⁶ Writing strong, clear headings and subheadings helps readers grasp the content at a glance, skip what they're not interested in, and settle quickly on what they're looking for (if it's there).

To **write strong, clear, information-carrying headings**, consider these suggestions:

- **Make headers into questions** that your web visitors often ask. Phrase the question as if they themselves were asking it ("Where can I have my child evaluated?"). Then answer the question, using the word "you" ("If your child is in school, you would ask the school to evaluate your child").
- **Write headers as action statements.** Try to avoid starting headers with nouns, which are passive. Verbs are active and affirmative. Be crisp and clear in your language.
- **Make the headings stand out** to the eye. Make them look different from the rest of the text by bolding them or putting them in a different color, font, or size.
- **Keep headings short.** Readers on the web see the first two words of a sentence or phrase most clearly.¹⁷ Consider starting with a keyword. For example: **Cost:** Will I have to pay for these services?

Front load headings with significant words

Start your headings with **content-significant words**. Users scan down the left, and they tend to note the first two words in a sentence or heading. It only makes sense to put the most important words where they're likely to see them. An added bonus is that headings with keywords in them are easier for search engines to find and use.¹⁸

Use bullets, numbered lists, and numerals

The value of **bullets** is that they break down walls of words and can be quickly scanned by web users. While most of us don't want to read a page of nothing *but* bullets, when they're used well, bullets can truly serve your users' need for grabbing information on the go.¹⁹

Numbered lists accomplish the same goal. They are also easy on the eyes, and are great for providing instructions that involve going step by step through a task or process.

Here's a surprise: **Use numerals**, instead of spelling out the number as a word (e.g., 7 as opposed to seven). Yes, we know that we're supposed to write out the numbers 1-10, but that's a rule from writing for print. Using the numeral on the web is recommended.²⁰

Don't center headings or text on the page

Centering text on the page is another artifact of writing for print that doesn't work well on the web, because people scanning pay the most attention to content along the left margin. Only 30% of their attention goes to the right side of the page, so they are very likely to miss what's in the middle.²¹

Because we sure don't want our online readers to miss a key heading that shows them how the content is organized:

- keep all headings and subheadings to the left margin; and
- differentiate their relative levels of importance (and subordination) by using HTML codes that display the various levels in different sizes, colors, or fonts (that your web developer specifies in your site's cascading style sheet).

Make your links meaningful

How you link text on your site is very important. Here's a quick summary of what eye-tracking research has found about links and user attention:²²

- Users **do** pay attention to links. So make those links visible! Underline them. Make them different in color from the main text. Make their color change once they've been visited by the user.
- **Links aligned with the left margin** get particular attention.
- Links embedded in the body of the text get less attention.
- **Users want to be able to predict what kind of content they'll find** if they follow the link.

Test your site with a few users

User testing can help create pages that most users will find appealing and functional. If you want to know **more about how to conduct user testing on your site**, try these two webpages for starters:

- Why You Only Need to Test with 5 Users
<http://www.nngroup.com/articles/why-you-only-need-to-test-with-5-users/>
- Recruiting Test Participants for Usability Studies
<http://www.nngroup.com/articles/recruiting-test-participants-for-usability-studies/>

2. Putting your essential message first

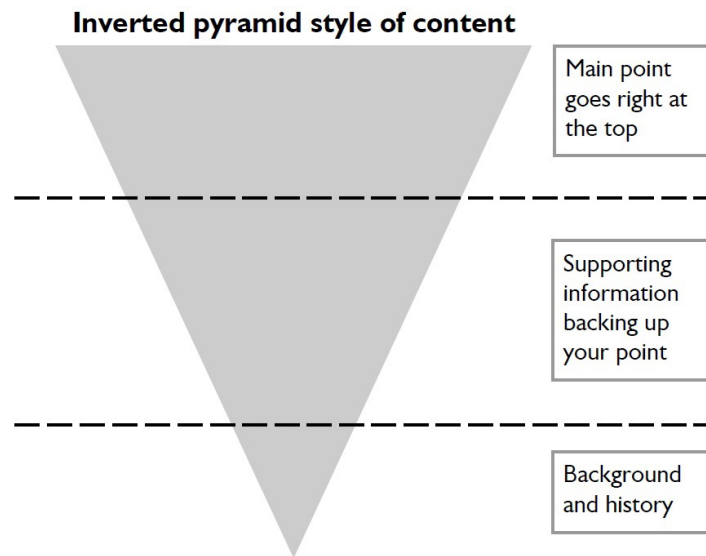
Help web visitors get the point of each of your webpages fast: **Load the opening paragraph with the essential message of the page.**

The web is action-packed, and people are in a hurry. Eye-tracking studies have shown that users pay the most attention to the content they see first—which would be the opening paragraphs.

Use the inverted pyramid approach

This style of "essential message first" is called the ***inverted pyramid***.²³ The approach comes from journalism, where you lead strong with the five Ws in the first paragraph (who? what? when? where? why?). This flips the content upside down from an academic writing style.

Remember all those writing lessons from grammar school to college? Forget them when you're writing for the web! Here's a graphic depiction of the inverted pyramid that shows what content goes into each section.²⁴



The inverted pyramid approach to writing fits the way people read on the web.

The Lead | The top part of the pyramid is called the **lead** (another newsroom term). It's the most important point of your webpage. If visitors take away only 1 point from your page, what point do you want that to be? That's your lead.²⁵

The Body | The center slice of the pyramid is the **body**. What you say here supports your lead and presents information in *descending order of importance*.²⁶

Good leads:

- are 1-2 sentences long
- use short sentences (30-35 words max)
- include information-carrying keywords
- help readers see whether the webpage has info relevant to their need or concern

Write the body of your webpage using the principles discussed in NICHCY's series of articles on [Writing for the Web](#). Specifically:

- Divide the content into distinct sections (especially if there's a lot of info to communicate)
- Use headings (in bold) to mark the sections
- Use headings rich with content words
- Keep individual paragraphs short
- Front-load important information at the start of sentences and paragraphs
- Make it easy for visitors to scan the content
- Give bulleted lists
- Include a table of contents, so visitors can jump to content of interest
- Delete words and sentences that aren't necessary to making your point

The Ending | The end of your webpage is where background information, history, and the least important information goes, what would be "nice" for readers to know. We can count ourselves lucky if web visitors read that far. But many will, as Jakob Nielsen notes:

People will look very far down a page if (a) the **layout encourages scanning**, and (b) the initially viewable information makes them **believe that it will be worth their time** to scroll.²⁷

Suggestions for long pages

Sometimes it's not possible—or desirable—to be brief. In the TA&D network, we have important information to share. Many people need the details of our content. And, as Nielsen observes, when people really **need a solution** to a problem or concern, they *will* read **comprehensive coverage** of the topic.²⁸ For many of our visitors, then, long pages make sense.

Nielsen suggests a solution that works well for both types of web users: those who want short, succinct webpages and those who need the full details.

- Start with overviews and short pages, and then...
- Link to long pages or white papers with in-depth coverage.²⁹

To make long pages as scannable as possible

- Use headings to divide the content up into short, easy-to-read paragraphs or sections.
- Allow white space on the page.
- Narrow the focus of the content or split the content into stand-alone pages.
- Cut text every way you can.

Shoot for **half the word count** you'd use for a document in print.

3. Chunking your content

Chunking your web content into small paragraphs helps your web visitors scan for the information they're looking for. Well-written paragraphs on the web:

- have only 1 main point,
- start with that main point, and
- are less than 100 words long.

Why small chunks of info suit web readers

Web visitors don't really read much of what's on a webpage—not much more than 20% on average.³⁰ They also skip straight over large blocks of text unless the first two words grab their attention.³¹

They *do* read:

- the first sentence or two on the page,
- headings and subheadings marked in bolded or differently colored text,
- captions on images, and
- the first and second words in a short paragraph.

Suggestions for chunking your content

Breaking up content into readable, scannable pieces is actually a fairly straightforward task. Start with these strategies.

1 | Create Sections Topped by Headings

Break your content out into sections that address one or two main points each. Mark each section with a bolded heading that puts keywords first and succinctly describes the message or content of the section.

2 | Put One Main Idea Per Paragraph

Limit each paragraph to 1 main point. The lead sentence in the paragraph should state that point. This helps make your message clear, helps readers scan for info, and keeps the paragraph short. If you start wandering into a different point, start a new paragraph.

3 | Short Paragraphs Rule!

Limit your paragraphs to no more than 3 or 4 short sentences. Readers pay the most attention to the first and last sentences in a paragraph. What's in between is likely to be skipped.³²

4 | Short Sentences Rule, Too!

Shorter sentences are easier to read and understand. If your sentences are averaging 15 or more words, try to break them into two simpler sentences.³³

5 | Try the One-Sentence Paragraph

It's okay to have only 1 sentence in a paragraph.

6 | Read the Content Aloud

Let the nature of your content suggest how it might best be subdivided and organized.³⁴ Sometimes it helps to read the content aloud, to hear how the ideas flow and where natural breaking points occur or the topic shifts, suggesting it's time for a new paragraph or section.

7 | Present Content as Bullet Points

Bullets are very easy to scan. When you can break up a wall of text into bullet points, readers can skim quickly and still get the point. That's even easier if each bullet contains just a few words. Web writers and researchers advise: No more than 7 bullet points in a list. Any more and readers may lose the connection between the items.³⁵

8 | Use Numbered Lists, Too

When giving instructions, numbered lists are the way to go, walking the reader through the steps to be followed in order. Numbered lists also work for content that you'd like visitors to read in a certain order.³⁶

9 | Add Links to Content Chunks

When your webpage is suddenly getting longer than expected, include “**Back to top**” links between chunks of content. This works especially well if you've included a table of contents at the top, which lets readers jump to content of interest.

Another type of link you can add at the end of content chunks is “**Read more.**” If users want to learn more about the topic, they can—on a separate page where you can elaborate in greater depth and detail.³⁷

10 | Break Longer Documents into Separate Pages

Longer documents may need to be broken into several interlinked pages, each with its own purpose or message. Taken together, the webpages tell the full story, but readers can pick and choose which pages are relevant to their needs or concerns. Offer the complete document as a PDF file for download and printing.

4. Writing plainly

Plain language writing is **reader-focused** writing. But what makes something plain language?

The Center for Plain Language defines “plain” in terms of people's *behavior*. Can the audience for the material quickly and easily:

- find what they need
- understand what they find
- act appropriately on that understanding?³⁸

Today, all of us who write can find immediate guidance on the principles of plain language at the government's website called plainlanguage.gov. You'll also find info and guidance on writing in plain language for the sake of your readers by visiting the resources we've listed at the end of this section.

Okay. Here come 10 suggestions for how to write in plain language that's easier for people to understand.

Write for the average reader

Know the expertise and interest of your average reader, and write to that person. Don't write to the experts, the lawyers, or doctoral candidates, unless they're your intended audience. To communicate with the average reader, write at the 6th to the 8th grade reading level.³⁹

Organize to serve the reader's needs

The two most useful principles to remember about organizing your info to serve the reader:

- Put the most important material first and the exceptions last.
- Organize material chronologically.

Use helpful headings

Headings help the reader find the way through your material. Headings should capture the essence of all the material under the heading—if they don't, you need more headings! You should have one or more headings on each page.

p.s. If you're writing for the web, use even more headings with less info under each. People skim and scan to find the answers to their questions quickly. Headings help them do this.

Use "you" to speak to your reader

Using pronouns pulls the reader into the document and makes the info more meaningful. Use "you" for the reader ("I" when writing question headings from the reader's viewpoint) and "we" for your agency.

Use active voice

Active voice makes it clear *who* is doing *what*. Active voice is generally shorter and clearer than passive voice. Active sentences put the actor first (the subject), then the verb, then the object of the action. This direct structure propels the reader through your writing.

Example

Passive: Your request for funding has been denied by the review committee.

Active: The review committee denied your request for funding.⁴⁰

Use short sentences and short sections

To help your reader get through your material, use short sentences, paragraphs, and sections. Readers get lost in long dense text with few headings. Chunking your material inserts white space, opening your document visually and making it more appealing.

Example

Before:

The Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommends a half hour or more of moderate physical activity on most days, preferably every day. The activity can include brisk walking, calisthenics, home care, gardening, moderate sports exercise, and dancing.

After:

Do at least 30 minutes of exercise, like brisk walking, most days of the week.⁴¹

Use concrete, familiar words

Big words don't impress people, they just confuse. Define (and limit!) your abbreviations. Avoid jargon, foreign terms, Latin terms, and legal terms.

Replacing complex words with simpler words allows your readers to concentrate on your content. Using simple and familiar words doesn't insult your readers' intelligence. It emphasizes clarity rather than formality. Save longer or complex words for when they are essential.

Readers often skip over terms they don't understand, hoping to get their meaning from the rest of the sentence. Readers complain about jargon more than any other writing fault. Every profession, trade, and organization has its own specialized terms. While we all complain about jargon, everyone writes it. We hate everyone else's jargon, but we love our own.

Plain language does not ban jargon and other specialist terms. But you need to understand your readers and match your language to their needs.

Examples

Here are two examples of complex and simple words for the same thing!⁴²

Instead of saying: accomplish

Try: carry out, do

Instead of saying: accorded

Try: given

Omit excess words

Eliminate excess words. Challenge every word—do you need it? Pronouns, active voice, and base verbs help eliminate excess words. So does eliminating unnecessary modifiers. For example, in “HUD and FAA issued a joint report” you don’t need “joint.” In “this information is really critical”, you don’t need “really.”

Examples

Before | When the process of freeing a vehicle that has been stuck results in ruts or holes, the operator will fill the rut or hole created by such activity before removing the vehicle from the immediate area.

After | If you make a hole while freeing a stuck vehicle, you must fill the hole before you drive away.⁴³

Place words carefully

Placing words carefully within a sentence is as important as organizing your document effectively. Keep subject, verb, and object close together. Put exceptions at the end. Place modifiers correctly—“we want only the best”, not “we only want the best.”

Use no more than 2 or 3 subordinate levels

Readers get lost when you use more than two or three levels in a document. If you find you need more levels, consider sub-dividing your top level into more parts.

Resources for more information

Plainlanguage.gov is not the only source of in-depth guidance on how to write plainly. It’s a premier one, to be sure, but here are other sites you can consult to learn more, find excellent examples, and take self-paced lessons. We’ve also thrown in two on readability formulas, which can help you calculate the reading level of your writing.

NIH Plain Language Online Training: <http://plainlanguage.nih.gov/CBTs/PlainLanguage/login.asp>

Plain Language Wizardry: <http://plainlanguage.com>

Plain English Campaign: <http://www.plainenglishtraining.com/>

Plain Language Association International: <http://www.plainlanguagenetwork.org/>

Center for Plain Language: <http://centerforplainlanguage.org/>

Readability Formulas: <http://www.readabilityformulas.com/>

Style Writer’s Readability Calculations: <http://www.stylewriter-usa.com/stylewriter-editing-readability.php>

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