

The Writer's E-Zine Home

Craft of Writing

Rhonda Bracey

Elements Of Good Web Writing

To understand the elements of good writing for the Web, you need to consider what annoys you about Web sites that you do not like, and conversely, what makes some of your Web experiences pleasant. It's easy to list the things we don't like...perhaps not so easy to identify the factors that make for an unobtrusive experience.

NOTE: This article discusses factual writing for the Web, not creative writing.

Before you continue reading too far, I'd ask that you do an activity. All it requires is for you to visit a variety of Web sites (five is a good number), and jot down what you do and don't like about them. Use one sheet of paper for each Web site and divide it into three columns: Good, Bad, and Neutral.

As this article is about writing and not graphic design, try not to list design elements that annoy you, such as vivid colors, pop-up ads, flashing banners, and so on. Concentrate on the text and the layout of the textual elements. Consider such elements as:

- the use of various fonts, font sizes, and colors for headings and body text
- the use of columns, tables, and headings to lay out the text
- how much scrolling (vertical and horizontal) is required to read the text
- how hyperlinks are described ("Click here" versus "see About Us")
- how many hyperlinks there are within the text, as versus the navigation areas

Next, look at the actual writing and content, and consider whether the author has:

- written in a language suitable for their target audience (is the target audience for the Web site defined anywhere?)
- written in a tone and style suitable for the content (prose will normally be written quite differently than instructional material)
- been aware of the international nature of the potential audience, and thus has avoided culturally-specific terminology or terms that could be offensive to other cultures

If you do this activity, you will find out a lot about the specifics of what you do and don't like. While this is your opinion on each of the Web sites you visited, there's a strong chance it matches the opinion of many others. So, how do you make best use of the information you've gathered?

Easy! Follow the writing principles exhibited in the "Good" column, and avoid making the same mistakes listed in the "Bad" column. To help you along, here are some guidelines.

Clarity

Important information should be placed at the beginning of sentences and important sentences should be

at the beginning of paragraphs. Try to include your conclusion in your introduction, allowing readers to skip the parts that led you to your conclusion. Use an active voice and address the reader personally (e. g., "You can benefit.>").

Additionally, avoid jargon unless you expect the audience to already be familiar with the terms. Terminology, tone, and style should be consistent throughout the site; inconsistency can confuse and annoy readers.

Brevity

Thomas Jefferson once said that "The most valuable of all talents is that of never using two words when one will do." So write tight, ruthlessly cutting unnecessary words. Use short, simple words and sentences. Only include one idea in each paragraph, and try not to have more than three sentences in each paragraph. However, never sacrifice clarity for brevity.

Chunking

Either divide long text into separate, linked pages (at logical breaks in the flow), or use headings, subheadings, and other visual elements (such as bullet lists and frequent paragraph breaks) to break up the text into manageable and readable chunks. Your aim is to create blocks of text that your readers can scan quickly. A secondary aim is to make the text short enough that readers do not have to scroll.

You also may want to include outlines or mini-Tables of Contents to assist readers in finding what they are looking for, and don't forget to provide hyperlinks to related information.

Relevance

Readers expect relevant content; if they don't find it, they'll leave. Don't just think of what you want to offer your readers — try and predict what they may expect of you.

Correctness

Grammatical mistakes, typos, and misspellings can spoil a reader's experience. Not everyone will notice, but plenty will. And error of fact can be disastrous to the credibility of the Web site. Have someone else — preferably a professional proofreader or editor — check your writing both before and after it has been coded for the Web.

Writing for the Web is different from writing for print publications; your reader hasn't spent money on purchasing the book (and, therefore, has a vested interest in reading it). The time you have to capture their attention is less than 10 seconds (some studies suggest it is less than five), so you need to tailor your writing so that you grab their attention and hold it. The guidelines covered here will help you do just that.

About the Author:

Rhonda Bracey owns her own technical writing company, CyberText Consulting Pty Ltd, based in Perth, Western Australia. She works as a contract technical writer for many companies, mostly doing software documentation and online help. Prior to getting into technical writing, Rhonda was a high school Deputy Principal and Head of Department: Library for many years. Contact: Rhonda.bracey@cybertext.com.au or <http://www.cybertext.com.au>.

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