

Writing for the web

When writing for the web, using plain language allows users to find what they need, understand what they have found, and then use it to meet their needs. It should also be actionable, findable, and shareable.

It's important to understand how what you are writing fits into the overall content strategy, what the content lifecycle entails, and who is involved in the process.

Why it matters

People read differently online than they do when they read print materials -- web users typically scan for information. In a [study of online reading behavior](#), Jakob Nielsen found that "on the average webpage, users have time to read at most 28% of the words during an average visit; 20% is more likely".

Identify Your Users' Top Tasks

People come to your website with a specific task in mind. When developing your site's content, keep your users' tasks in mind and write to ensure you are helping them accomplish those tasks. If your website doesn't help them complete that task, they'll leave. Conduct market research, perform a [task analysis](#) and other types of user research, and [analyze metrics](#) to better understand what users are looking to accomplish.

Knowing your users' top tasks can help you identify:

- Content to feature on your homepage or landing pages
- Page headers and sub headers
- A logical structure to each page's content

How to Write User-Friendly Content

It's important to target your audience when writing for the web. By knowing who you are writing for, you can write at a level that will be meaningful for them. Use the [personas](#) you created while designing the site to help you visualize who you are writing for.

- **Use the words your users use.** By using keywords that your users use, you will help them understand the copy and will help optimize it for search engines.
- **Chunk your content.** Chunking makes your content more scannable by breaking it into manageable sections.
- **Front-load the important information.** Start with the content that is most important to your audience, and then provide additional details.
- **Use pronouns.** The user is "you." The organization or government agency is "we." This creates cleaner sentence structure and more approachable content.
- **Use active voice.** "The board proposed the legislation" not "The regulation was proposed by the board."
- **Use short sentences and paragraphs.** The ideal standard is no more than 20 words per sentence, five sentences per paragraph. Use dashes instead of semi-colons or, better

yet, break the sentence into two. It is ok to start a sentence with “and,” “but,” or “or” if it makes things clear and brief.

- **Use bullets and numbered lists.** Don’t limit yourself to using this for long lists—one sentence and two bullets is easier to read than three sentences.
- **Use clear headlines and subheads.** Questions, especially those with pronouns, are particularly effective.
- **Use images, diagrams, or multimedia** to visually represent ideas in the content. Videos and images should reinforce the text on your page.
- **Use white space.** Using white space allows you to reduce noise by visually separate information.

It’s also important to create an editorial calendar. You can encourage visitors to return to your site by keeping your content fresh and up-to-date, especially when working with blogs, social media, or dynamic content websites.

SOURCE: <https://www.usability.gov/how-to-and-tools/methods/writing-for-the-web.html>

Document Checklist for Plain Language on the Web

On the web, people are in a hurry. They skim and scan, looking for quick answers to their questions. Help your readers quickly find what they need with these web writing tips:

- Less is more! Be concise.
- Break documents into separate topics.
- Use even shorter paragraphs than on paper.
- Use short lists and bullets to organize information.
- Use even more lists than on paper.
- Use even more headings with less under each heading.
- Questions often make great headings.
- Present each topic or point separately, and use descriptive section headings.
- Keep the information on each page to no more than two levels.
- Make liberal use of white space so pages are easy to scan.
- Write (especially page titles) using the same words your readers would use when doing a web search for the info.
- Don’ t assume your readers have knowledge of the subject or have read related pages on your site. Clearly explain things so each page can stand on its own.
- Never use "click here" as a link — link language should describe what your reader will get if they click the link.
- Eliminate unnecessary words.

SOURCE: <http://www.plainlanguage.gov/howto/quickreference/weblis.cfm>