

How good is your website content?

Writing for the web is not the same as writing for printed materials. Attention span on the web is short and reading on the screen is often uncomfortable. It is important to edit down text and keep important information near the top of the page.

People don't read web pages

To understand how to write for the web you first need to consider how people will read your pages, or unfortunately, how they don't read.

Statistics and research on how people read a web page show that:

- Reading on the screen is 25% slower than reading on paper
- On average only 20% of your content will be read
- Studies show an F-shaped reading pattern – the eyes scan the heading then tend to focus on the left of the page as they move quickly down to see if the content is relevant
- Banner blindness is common with image banners, and content on the right of the page which may look like an advert

Make your content easy to scan

As most people scan web pages very quickly it is important to write content that takes advantage of this. Write summaries to encourage further reading. The first paragraph should be a summary of what the rest of the page will say.

Use meaningful headings

Using meaningful headings throughout your copy will pin point the most important information you want to communicate. Headings are signposts for the reader and will encourage them to read more

Cut your copy down

Most people only read 20% of a web page so make sure the important information is not buried in too much copy:

- Make sure every paragraph makes a point
- Don't hide the message in unnecessary text
- Avoid flowery language and jargon

A good guide to word lengths:

- **Headings** should be 8 words or less
- **Sentences** should be 15 to 20 words
- **Paragraphs** should be 40 to 70 words

Use bulleted lists to pull out pertinent points

If you need to make several important points in one paragraph put these into a list. Bullet points are easier to scan.

Avoid the phrases ‘click here’ and ‘read more’

Make the words in your links informative and they will be easier to find and draw more traffic. Links also have an effect on search engine ranking. If your link includes the key words for its content the web page is more likely to appear in search engine results.

Well written content improves search engine ranking

- Good copy will be rich with keywords
- People are more likely to link to your page if they find it useful
- Headings and links are given higher relevance in search engine results than plain text on its own.

Further Reading

Forget the ‘what’, focus on the ‘how’ – Web Credible

www.webcredible.co.uk/user-friendly-resources/web-credibility/what-how.shtml

Compelling headlines to improve your search engine ranking – Web Credible

www.webcredible.co.uk/user-friendly-resources/search-engine-optimisation/headings.shtml

Plain English tips for clear websites – Plain English Campaign

www.plainenglish.co.uk/websitesguide.pdf

Writing content that works – A List Apart

www.alistapart.com/articles/writingcontentthatworksforaliving

Letting Go of the Words – two free chapters from the book by Janice (Ginny) Redish

www.redish.net/writingfortheweb/

How users read on the web – Jakob Nielsen’s Alertbox

www.useit.com/alertbox/9710a.html