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# CHAPTER 5

# Writing

by Erin Anderson

What's the main reason you go online? Is it to check email? Chat with friends? Shop? Watch TV? Download music? No matter what gets you there in the first place, there's one thing every website, mobile application, widget, and web-based video game has in common: words.

Think about it. Even if you're flipping through an online photo gallery, you still rely on textual cues about how to view the pics, upload new files, share stuff with friends, print images, create a profile, tag or post comments, and so on.

There's a good reason for all that text—and for making sure it works: In the end, every website must help its visitors (aka web users) complete some kind of task.

Maybe that task is to gather data. Or complete a transaction. Or send a message. Regardless, it's the words on these sites—the instructions, the cues, the information—that affect how quickly (or not) users are able to accomplish their goals.

Well. With all those words online, we're going to need smart, savvy people who know how to get the job done.

## How impatient is “impatient?”

Studies cited in Jakob Nielsen’s book *Prioritizing Web Usability* (New Riders, 2006) show that “users visiting a new site spend an average of 30 seconds on the homepage and less than 2 minutes on the entire site before deciding to abandon it.” (<http://www.useit.com/alertbox/features.html>)

He adds, “They spend a bit more time if they decide to stay on a site, but still only 4 minutes on average.”

## Two to four minutes per site? But what about all that brilliant web copy?

Exactly. Nobody has come to read your brilliant writing. (Again: it’s not about the Big Idea around here.) Web users have come to extract data. To receive a message. It’s the web writer’s job to make sure that message comes across loud and clear, in the most no-nonsense (but still engaging) way possible. Period.

## Content should drive design—not the other way around

This approach of tending to other aspects of site design before getting around to the content ignores the fact that it’s the content users come for in the first place. They don’t come for the design, even if they appreciate it once they arrive. So because the content is the priority for the user, it should always inform the design and IA—not the other way around.

Think about what would happen if a city planner decided to construct a new community center without finding out exactly when and how it would get used. Or how often. And by how many people at once. What if instead the city planner simply decided it would look cool to arrange several small rooms around a large common area?

That approach would force the community to conform to the planner’s abstract design, which would hardly represent the most elegant or efficient use of materials, space, and budget. How could it possibly? It

wasn't designed with the user's needs in mind.

Similarly, when web content isn't considered until late in the website design process, that content is forced to conform to parameters that likely aren't the most elegant or efficient way of meeting user needs or business goals.

Each page of the site receives a unique number and position in the hierarchy. The home page is always at the top, because that's the "main entrance" for the site. Once a user enters through the main entrance, he sees (in this case) four "doors" (pages) he could open.

If he selects "Our Products," he'll see three more doors/pages all at the same hierarchical level. These smaller doors featuring specific products are subsets of the main navigation category "Our Products."

Writing in this kind of structure is especially important online. As the EyeTrack07 study shows, online readers scan a page looking for relevant information. If they don't find it in your first paragraph or headline, they're not going to keep reading. So it's crucial to begin the article, list, or page with the most important information first.

Only then should you start introducing supporting arguments and details, saving the most technical information for the end. If the user is interested enough to make it that far, he'll be ready for that level of detail. If he isn't interested in the details, he'll at least walk away with a general sense of what the story is about.

A good rule of thumb for streamlining and editing your copy is to cut the number of words in half. (And then cut more.) You'll be amazed by how few words you actually need to get your point across when you choose the right ones, and by how much of what you're saying is just fluff—even if it sounds nice.

For example, don't make the user wade through a paragraph that welcomes her in grand fashion to the blah blah place where she can

check her blah blah cell phone account. (Let your client's customer call center handle those niceties.)

Just give her the link that will take her to the right place. Provide a (very) short description if absolutely necessary. Or better yet, write the link itself in such a way that she'll understand clicking is going to make all her overage fees go away. (For example.)

The name of the game is understanding a user's needs, staying out of her way with unnecessary copy, and giving her what she came for. Right now.

In terms of tone and voice, web writing should generally sound direct and personable, not overly formal or unnecessarily showy. So if we mean to say *help* we don't write *assistance*. If we mean *many*, we don't write *numerous*. If we mean *enough* we don't write *sufficient*. And so on.

Remember, websites are conversations between an organization and its site users. The best way for web writers to help facilitate that conversation is by writing the way we would speak to someone we know and respect. In other words, we should be authentic and engaging.

If the job calls for expressing passion about the subject matter, do so without resorting to flashy words and punctuation. Or you'll come across as hyper and smarmy.

Please note: It's not that you should never use big words or technical terms where they're appropriate. Because it's also important to be specific. So if you need to use a word you wouldn't say in everyday speech but it happens to be the right word, go ahead.



**Tip:** Your style guide will come in handy for deciding which terms fit the voice and tone of the site, versus those that may come across as forced, overly formal, or overly casual. Another great way to check your tone is by reading aloud through your content deck.

Take this sentence, for example:

ComCorp, Inc., is North America's leading specialty retailer of innovative consumer electronics and appliances, operating nearly 1,500 fully stocked retail stores in the United States and Canada under the popular brands Comet

Shop, Future Boutique, Geeks Galore, and Electro-Magnetroid Audio Video.

The sentence is too long in any medium. But on the Web, it's practically an essay. Let's see what happens when we break it up into a few shorter sentences and strip out some of the adjectives:

ComCorp, Inc., is North America's leading specialty retailer of consumer electronics and appliances. We operate nearly 1,500 retail stores in the United States and Canada. Our subsidiaries include Comet Shop, Future Boutique, Geeks Galore, and Electro-Magnetroid Audio Video.

Even if it's just a link to return to the home page or to read the next article, a user should never reach the end of a page without being given an opportunity to do something.