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GUIDELINES FOR EFFECTIVE WEB WRITING

Why do we need web writing guidelines?

Web site content is all about customer service.

Your website is a primary source of information and services for citizens, staff, businesses, investors, visitors and other stakeholders. It is essential that your website provides stakeholders with information and services that are accurate, up-to-date, visually pleasing, easy-to-read, and easy-to-find.

To achieve these objectives, eSolutions has developed these web writing guidelines to ensure the reader remains the copywriter's number one priority when developing text for your website.

Following these guidelines is critical to reaching readers in the most effective way .The content should meet their information needs and viewing habits when it comes to searching and reading online.

If readers don't find the information they're looking for on your website or if the information is written in a manner that does not meet their needs, they will leave your website and search elsewhere.

Our web writing guidelines have been developed through extensive research into the best practices in writing for a website.

Guidelines

1.	**Know your audience.**
2.	**Be relevant and objective.**
3.	**KISS - Keep it simple and succinct.**

### 1.	Know Your Audience

On an average web page, visitors have time to read, at most, 28% of the words during an average visit and 20% is more likely. Skimming and scanning text is common behaviour for most visitors. A typical reader will spend about 2.5 seconds on your webpage and then move on if there is no "hook" to hold his/her attention.

1.	**Before writing a word of web content**, ask yourself the following questions:

  - Who is my target audience?
  - What information are they looking for?
  - Are they likely to read everything I've written?
  - Is all of the content on the page useful and/or of interest to them?
  - How is this information going to help the reader?

    Tip: As a check, read the document as if you were the intended audience and consider what may be lacking or what may be unnecessary to include.

2.	**Consider literacy levels** -- To reach lower-literacy visitors and create greater ease for all visitors, target the lowest literacy level, which is a Grade 3 to 5 reading level. Ask yourself these questions:

- What does the reader need to know about the topic?
- What will be the most useful information for the reader?

3. **Word usage** -- If a shorter word works, use it. Keep language as simple as possible to convey the message clearly to your reader.

   - *i.e. "use" instead of "utilize"*

4. **Active voice** -- Active voice is easy for readers to understand, so it should be used primarily when writing web content.

   - *Active: The man must have eaten five hamburgers.*
   - *Passive: Five hamburgers must have been eaten by the man.*

5. **Direct language** -- Use specific, concrete terms to enhance clarity; avoid using obscure words or phrases unfamiliar to the target audience. A simple sentence structure featuring short phrases and direct conclusions is ideal. Sentence fragments are also permissible.

   - *The program is free.*
   - *Healthy neighbourhoods mean healthy communities.*
   - *Applications are due Feb. 20.*

6. **Tone** -- Write in a conversational, friendly tone, and in the first-person (i.e. you, we, us, etc.) where possible, as opposed to one that's authoritative or educational. Readers would rather see the word "you" over "one" as it is more personal, inclusive and meaningful.

2.   Be Relevant and Objective

1. **From the top** -- Introductory text on web pages is usually too long, so visitors skip it. Cut fluffy introductory paragraphs as they waste words. Readers will either skip the content altogether or judge the rest of the page based on the introduction, leading them to stop reading.

   Start a page with your most useful and important key message. Continue with the next most important points in the ensuing paragraphs. This is often referred to as the inverted-pyramid style of writing. Short introductions can increase usability by explaining the remaining content's purpose.

   Chunks of information should be 100 words or less, requiring little or no scrolling.

2. **Feature actionable content/hyperlinks** -- The reader's eyes go directly to more actionable content, such as bulleted lists or hyperlinks -- content the reader can select and follow to a solution or answer. Make sure to include concise, actionable, bulleted lists or hyperlinks whenever possible.

   Use **bulleted lists** to break up text. Within a bulleted list, make sure that the grammatical structure is parallel. For example, if the first bullet starts with a noun, the rest of the bullets in the list should be treated the same.

Use **hyperlinks** within pages to link to other pages featuring additional, but not quite as relevant or necessary, information on the topic. This way, readers can choose to follow the links later, without disrupting the flow of information. Ensure that it is clear what all hyperlinks refer to; use "blurbs" to describe what visitors will find when they click on a link.

- **Optimal use:** "Visit the [Bay of Fundy](#) website for more information."
- **Ineffective use:** "For more information on the Bay of Fundy, [click here](#).
- **Ineffective use:** "For more information on the Bay of Fundy, visit www.bayoffundy.com

3. **Avoid blatant sales pitches**. People want to know what is in it for them; they already know what is in it for you. Engaging copy is not about telling and selling, it is about helping the reader feel a connection to you and your service/message.

4. **Keep your messages flowing by using connector words and phrases.**

- Use words like…But, However, So, Because, What's more, in addition, etc.

3. KISS -- Keep it Simple and Succinct

1. **Keep posts short** -- While readers are presumably interested in a topic since they have begun to read about it, this interest wanes more quickly when reading online than when reading print. The content should be clear, direct, brief and to the point (quality of information over quantity).

2. **Write brief, meaningful headlines** -- If the headline fails to get the visitor's attention, he or she won't bother to read the remaining copy. Ensure the headline, summary and lead clearly indicate the scope of the piece, when taken out of context and standing alone.

3. **Communicate information quickly** -- The most important information should be at the top of the page. Given that web visitors are scanners, focus on the *what* and *how*:

- **What:** Tell visitors what your service/project means for them. Communicate the benefit clearly. i.e. problems you solve, processes you improve, challenges you meet, and what you offer to improve their quality of life.

- **How:** Briefly describe how your organization conducts the service. Create an image or visual in your visitors' imagination illustrating the service at work for them. This lends credibility to your claims.

4. **Length of text** -- To keep text tightly focused, keep your content to around 500 words. If adapting text from a print source, consider the 50 % rule: cut the print text in half. If the writing still makes sense when cut in half, then leave it short. Add more only if you need it.

- *Tip: If adapting from print, use a highlighter on the hard copy to highlight the most important information. This forms the basis of your web content.*

5.   **Offer small bits at a time** -- Focus each section/chunk of content on a single topic, so that readers can find the information. Large blocks of text are difficult to read online

6.   **Sub headings** -- Put sub headlines throughout the web copy to break up text into smaller chunks. This makes the copy visually appealing and gives the perception that it is easier to read. Sub headlines are effective for maintaining the attention of readers who scan text and don't read each and every word.

7.   **Sentence length** -- Avoid overly long sentences. Sentences should be an average of 20 words or less. Vary the sentence lengths for interest. Use short paragraphs and bullets when possible.

- *Tip: Short sentences -- from three to five words -- are very effective (but use them only for emphasis).*

8.   **Keywords** -- Research keywords that relate to your key messages. Anticipate keyword searches that potential visitors could perform to find your information on the web. Highlight keywords in your copy in **bold** such as facts and figures that would interest your readers.

The headline on a page should include at least one keyword that emphasizes the focus of the web page. Using keywords early on in headlines also means content is more likely to be picked up by search engines (SEO: search engine optimization) and appear higher on their lists.

Quick Writing Tips

1.   **Write concisely**. If the print version of a brochure is 500 words in length, try to condense the web version to 250 words. Chunks of text should be 100 words or less and sentences should be kept under 20 words.

2.   **Break up paragraphs**. A solid block of text is very hard to read on the screen, so keep paragraphs to three or four sentences, each with space between them.

3.   **Use a lot of headings and sub headings**. These help readers find what they're looking for.

4.   **Use "blurbs" to describe what visitors will find when they click on a link.** For example, Lodging in Whistler -- From 5-star hotels to inexpensive hostels.

5.   **Make actions easy and include bulleted lists and hyperlinks.**

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