Writing for the Web

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Reading Level: Assumptions

• Higher reading level = Better writing
• Better writing = More educated author

Academic writing is often focused on trying to impress the reader with the depth and breadth of the author’s knowledge, rather than trying to communicate efficiently and effectively.
Reading Level: Reality

• The average reading level in the US is Grade 8. (That’s the goal for online readability.)

• Ernest Hemingway, the Pulitzer- and Nobel Prize-winning novelist whose work shaped 20th-century fiction, wrote at a 4th-grade reading level.
Reading Level

How well do U.S. adults read?

Source: contently.com
Reading Level

% of Americans Who Can Read...

- The Old Man and the Sea
- Harry Potter
- The Tipping Point
- Jurassic Park
- Good to Great
- An Academic Paper

Source: contently.com
Low Literacy?

- Low literacy affects nearly half of US adults, *BUT*...
- The **real issue** is that we are **ALL** low literacy at times.
- When you’re tired, busy, or under stress, it’s much harder to understand what you read.
Distracted Readers

• The point isn’t to write for grade-schoolers, the point is to write for **distracted readers**.
• Most of your readers probably *don’t* have low literacy skills, but when they are reading your content ONLINE, they may behave as though they do.
Simplifying ≠ “Dumbing Down”

“Won’t dumbing down the content make it unpleasant for everyone else?”

• Making information easier for everyone to read, understand, and use is a noble goal. Everyone appreciates clarity.
• Reducing complexity won’t cause you to lose credibility.
• If something can be said simply, it should be.
Before you start writing for the web...

• Let’s look at a few specifics about READING on the web.
Reading on the Web

It’s physically more difficult

• Screens are **lower resolution** than print
  • Print = at least 300 dots per inch
  • Computer screen = 72 dpi

• It’s **slower** than reading a printed page
  • About 25% slower
  • More tiring to the eyes
Reading on the Web

We read differently online

• We **skim** and **scan** to find what we’re looking for
• We **quickly abandon pages** that don’t look immediately relevant or digestible
• Certain **parts of the page** get more attention than others
  • [Lazy Eyes: How we read online](#)
Reading on the Web

Eyetracking studies: General content, product page, search results
Before you Begin...

The best websites are focused on the **user**. Ask yourself...
- Who’s visiting this site?
- What do they want to know?
- What do they want to **DO**?

The best sites serve different interest levels
- [Web Writing for Many Interest Levels](#)
  - One sentence summary
  - One paragraph summary
  - Thirst for more
Good Web Writing is...

- Scannable
- Inverted
- Concise
- Focused
- Real
- Error-free
Scannable

• Use meaningful **headlines**

• Break up long paragraphs into shorter ones

• Use formatting to emphasize the main points

• Use **lists** whenever possible

• Don’t try to be too clever

• Use the words your readers are looking for
Scannable: Bad Example

The person who is humble and retiring has three characteristics: mysterious charm, unspectacular excellence, and unnoticed influence. We consider the charm mysterious because the person does nothing we can see to draw our attention. We call the excellence unspectacular because the person does not boast, or make announcements, but completes all work with thoroughness. We call this person’s influence unnoticed because although everyone looks to this person as an authority, they hardly mention the name. The influence spreads like water underground, invisible.
The person who is humble and retiring has three characteristics:

1. **Mysterious charm**: We consider the charm mysterious because the person does nothing we can see to draw our attention.

2. **Unspectacular excellence**: We call the excellence unspectacular because the person does not boast, or make announcements, but completes all work with thoroughness.

3. **Unnoticed influence**: We call this person’s influence unnoticed because although everyone looks to this person as an authority, they hardly mention the name. The influence spreads like water underground, invisible.
Cut any words that don’t add meaning.

Which is easier to read: this ...?
• We’re pleased to announce the release of our free photo widget, after six months of development and extensive user testing. When you download the widget, you’ll be able to upload photos directly from your phone to your website.

... or this?
• Use our free photo widget to upload photos from your phone to your website. Download it now.
Inverted

Use the “Inverted Pyramid” approach to storytelling...

- Most newsworthy info
- Important details
- Other general info
  - Background info
Inverted

• Put results, conclusions or must-know information at the *top* of the screen
• Start with a preview / summary
  • One-sentence overview or bullet list
• The *opposite* of most academic writing!
  • *Why Writing Like a College Student Will Kill You Online*
Inverted: Bad Example

Taking a shower, washing dishes, and doing your laundry all add moisture to the air in your Recreational Vehicle. Any appliance generates heat, and may cause condensation on cool surfaces such as windows, doors, walls, and roof. The walls of your RV have less insulation than a house does, so cold weather makes drops of water form on the inside walls. Remember—if you let moisture build up inside, it can damage the walls and ceiling of your RV.
Inverted: Good Example

Don’t let moisture build up inside your RV. It can damage the walls and ceiling of your vehicle.

- Taking a shower, washing dishes, and doing your laundry all add moisture to the air.
- Most appliances generate heat, which may cause condensation on cool surfaces such as windows, doors, walls, and roof.
- The walls of your RV have less insulation than a house does, so cold weather makes drops of water form on the inside walls.
Concise

• Cut your text to half what you would use in print
• Use short words, short sentences, and short paragraphs
• Again, if it *can* be in a list, make it a list
• Use active voice (it’s usually shorter, as well as more powerful)
Concise: Exercise

“When I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people's hats off—then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can.”

— Herman Melville, Moby Dick
Concise: Improved

I must go to sea when:

- I’m depressed or melancholy
- I stop in front of coffin warehouses
- I follow funerals
- I have a powerful urge to knock people’s hats off
“Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people's hats off—then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can.”

One sentence summary:
“I must go to sea when I’m sad or angry or obsessed with death.”
Focused

• Stick to **one idea** per paragraph
• Make sure each page makes sense if read in isolation (because it may be)
• Use links/navigation to connect topics that make up a larger series of topics
  • Don’t say “click here.”
    • [Why Your Links Should Never Say “Click Here”](#)
Real

Use plain language

• Direct, honest, free of jargon
• Avoid “marketing-speak” and “academese”
• Write to inform, not to impress
• Use acronyms & abbreviations sparingly

[Link to the source of the quote: "Attack of the Zombie Copy"

“Empty of everything but a terrible hunger for human brains”]
Real

Write the way you speak (or the way your audience speaks)

• Don’t worry so much about proper grammatical structure. Write the way your audience talks.
• Read your writing out loud, or use a screen reader (such as Natural Reader) to read it for you
How would you rewrite this email to give it a fighting chance of being read?

“Hello Doug, my name is Charles Peek. I work for a company named Fast Track Transfer. The purpose of this email is to provide you with an opportunity to view a product that we have recently acquired. Also to determine if the product could be a finishing touch on your new Residence Hall project or any existing facility. We have in our possession, around 250 armoires that we removed from a very high end hotel in downtown Minneapolis. Attached are some pictures of this very versatile armoire. This would be a very cost effective way to give even a new facility a face lift. If this email finds you and you do not deal with these issues, I would be very thankful if you could forward it on to the correct person. Please feel free to call or email myself or Mike at the number below. Thank you and have a great day.”
Real: Exercise

Here’s a better approach:

Hello Doug,

You don't know me, but I'm writing to tell you about a great deal on some furniture that may be a good fit for Carleton's new Residence Hall project (or any other dorm on campus).

My company recently purchased 250 armoires from a high-end hotel in downtown Minneapolis. You can see from the attached photos that they're very nice looking, and we're offering them at a terrific price.

If you're interested in learning more, please give me a call at the number below.

Thank you and have a great day,
Charles Peek
Real: Another Bad Example

Discover Kickbox

• Good formatting...
  • Headings & bullet lists
• But *who talks like this*?
  • “Individuals can use this site to go through the Kickbox process on their own and organizations can deploy the Kickbox process to their employees at scale.”
• (And the vague photo doesn’t help!)
Error-Free

• Harder to read = harder to proofread
  • Skimming leads to “Predictive processing”
  • Your brain fills in/corrects information
• Ask someone else to proof for you!
  • Or print the page and read a physical copy
Error-Free

• Proof for *clarity*, not just spelling & grammar. Ask the reader:
  • Where were you bored?
  • Where were you confused?
  • Where were you annoyed?
  • What did you get out of it?
Tools to Improve Readability

- **Hemingway App**
  - Shows grade level, flags passive voice, adverbs, etc.

- **Tone Analyzer**
  - Uses linguistic analysis to detect emotional, social, and writing tone. Offers suggestions for improvement.
As you walk around campus this week, you may notice some short white tubes on posts in various places. **These are artificial cavities, nest boxes for birds that would typically** rear their young in tree holes. This breeding season, if you see a baby bird out of its nest, don’t try to rescue it yourself! Instead, move it away from where someone might step on it, but still close to where you found it. Touching a chick will not scare away the parents. The parents have a much better chance of helping it than you do, so leave it where they can find it.

A few of the birds you might see around the boxes are bluebirds, chickadees, and house sparrows, among others. Eastern bluebirds can often be found sitting on posts and low branches, or perched on top of the box they chose to nest in. They’ll drop to the ground and fly back up to their perch, hunting the bugs they eat. Bluebirds can rear up to two batches of chicks during their summer breeding season.

Chickadees stay in Minnesota all year round, and are seed-eaters. **They can cache the seeds they gather and remember each location during the winter when food is scarce.** They have a call so distinctive they were named after it: a shrill *chick-a-dee-dee-dee*. They too will nest in artificial cavities, and line their snug nests with moss and fur.

House sparrows are the birds you may see the most around campus. **They thrive around people, eating crumbs and leftovers and nesting in the many cavities that humans create by our presence.** If you see tiny twigs poking out from a gutter, a light socket, a rafter, or any other bird-sized space, you can bet that it’s a house sparrow nest.
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House sparrows are the birds you may see the most around campus. They thrive around people, eating crumbs and leftovers and nesting in various human-created cavities. If you see tiny twigs poking out from a gutter, a light socket, a rafter, or any other bird-sized space, you can bet that it’s a house sparrow nest.