Web-writing basics

Writing for the web follows the basic rules of writing – for example, use clear, coherent language, and ensure that the content is copyedited and proofread. However, web content has some important differences in structure and format.

Headings and structure

Use an inverted pyramid construction – give the most important information at the top of the page.

Write clear and informative headings – headings and page titles are often displayed out of context on search engine results pages, so they must contain enough information for readers to identify the content. Delete leading articles (such as the and an) and start headings with keywords.

Write for scannability – create white space by using lists, subheadings and short paragraphs.

Language and length

Be succinct – online readers skim content, and will quickly abandon longwinded sites. If articles are long (1,000 words or more), add a short summary up front.

Write short paragraphs because these are easier to scan than long blocks of text. Single-sentence paragraphs can draw attention to key points that might otherwise be buried. Bullet lists are useful.

Write in plain English – use the active voice and simple words that people can relate to.

Speak to readers, not at them – have a conversation with readers, and help them engage by using I, we and us.

Use numerals (1, 2, 3), not words (one, two, three) – numerals help people scan and identify numbers. When reading online, users scan the page for clues that might answer their question. If the answer they seek is a number, the numerals stand out on the page and are easier to identify.

Accessibility

Format the text – use styles to tag content (e.g. headings, lists, bold or italic text). Use heading levels in sequential hierarchy (i.e. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5), without skipping any.

Create proper tables – enter your table as a table (not tabbed text, text frames or an image), specify header rows, and keep the structure of the table as simple as possible. Do not use subheading rows. Do not rely on colour to convey meaning – use text as well.

Ensure visual contrast – in graphs, figures and images, ensure that there is sufficient colour or pattern contrast between elements and the background. You can check this using a colour contrast checker.

Provide alternative (alt) text – write alt text for all meaningful nontext elements (figures, maps, photos, etc). Alt text should provide an overall description of the contents and message of the picture.

Search engine optimisation

Write clear, unique and informative metadescriptions – the metadescription appears on search engine results pages, and when URLs are shared on social media sites. It needs to tell users what the page is about and encourage them to click through to the site.

Include keywords in all headings and page titles – this helps the search engine understand the content on the page and how relevant it is to the search query. However, do not stuff content with keywords – this undermines the user experience and makes pages harder to read.

Speak the user's language – use simple terms that people are likely to search for, and avoid cute headlines or made-up phrases.

Offer stable URLs – ensure that other sites can link directly to each piece of content, and make sure links remain up to date and functional.