



Writing for the web

- How users read on the web
- Increasing credibility
- Measuring the effect of good writing
- 10 (or so) tips for good writing

- Credits and references: Jacob Nielsen, Jennifer kyrnin



How users read on the web

- They don't
- People rarely read Web pages word by word; instead, **they scan the page**, picking out individual words and sentences
- 79 percent of test users always scanned any new page they came across;
- only 16 percent read word-by-word.



F shaped pattern for reading web content

- This **dominant reading pattern** looks somewhat like an F and has the following three components:
- Users first read in a **horizontal movement**, usually across the upper part of the content area. This initial element forms the F's top bar.
- Next, users move down the page a bit and then read across in a **second horizontal movement** that typically covers a shorter area than the previous movement. This additional element forms the F's lower bar.
- Finally, users scan the content's left side in a **vertical movement**. Sometimes this is a fairly slow and systematic scan that appears as a solid stripe on an eyetracking heatmap. Other times users move faster, creating a spottier heatmap. This last element forms the F's stem.

How users read on the web



Implications of the F Pattern

- **Users won't read your text thoroughly** in a word-by-word manner. Exhaustive reading is rare, especially when prospective customers are conducting their initial research to compile a shortlist of vendors. Yes, some people will read more, but most won't.
- **The first two paragraphs must state the most important information.** There's some hope that users will actually read this material, though they'll probably read more of the first paragraph than the second.
- **Start subheads, paragraphs, and bullet points with information-carrying words** that users will notice when scanning down the left side of your content in the final stem of their F-behavior. They'll read the third word on a line much less often than the first two words.

As a result, Web pages have to employ **scannable text**

- highlighted **keywords** (hypertext links serve as one form of highlighting; typeface variations and color are others)
- meaningful **sub-headings** (not "clever" ones)
- bulleted **lists**
- **one idea** per paragraph (users will skip over any additional ideas if they are not caught by the first few words in the paragraph)
- The inverted pyramid style, starting with the conclusion
- **half the word count** (or less) than conventional writing
- www.apcm.ca



Credibility, you must communicate trustworthiness

- **Design quality:** professional appearance feels solid; clear navigation conveys respect for customers and an implied promise of good service. Typos or difficult navigation communicate disregard for the users. <http://www.fredfrap.com>
- **Up-front disclosure** of all aspects of the customer relationship. For example, **reveal shipping charges** (shipping policy and examples) immediately rather than waiting until after the user has placed an order. You may cheat a few people into ordering by hiding the shipping costs, but many more will abandon the site at an early stage of the process. And those users who do get cheated will only be suckers once.



Credibility, you must communicate trustworthiness

- **Comprehensive, correct, and current** content and product selection feel solid. If a site has product photos, it should have good shots of *all* products. Haphazard, random content signal a brittle service. Usability tests of a map site were done that did not show a recently constructed bridge: users instantly lost faith in the site and wondered what else was missing from the maps.
- **Connected to the rest of the Web** with links in and out. Not being afraid to link to other sites is a sign of confidence, and third-party sites are much more credible than anything you can say yourself. Isolated sites feel like they have something to hide.



Promotional writing (control condition)

- using the "marketese" found on many commercial websites

Nebraska is filled with internationally recognized attractions that draw large crowds of people every year, without fail. In 1996, some of the most popular places were Fort Robinson State Park (355,000 visitors), Scotts Bluff National Monument (132,166), Arbor Lodge State Historical Park & Museum (100,000), [Carhenge](#) (86,598), Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer (60,002), and Buffalo Bill Ranch State Historical Park (28,446).



Concise text (58% usability improvement)

- About half the word count as the control condition

In 1996, six of the best-attended attractions in Nebraska were Fort Robinson State Park, Scotts Bluff National Monument, Arbor Lodge State Historical Park & Museum, [Carhenge](#), Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer, and Buffalo Bill Ranch State Historical Park.



Scannable layout (47% usability improvement)

- using the same text as the control condition in a layout that facilitated scanning

Nebraska is filled with internationally recognized attractions that draw large crowds of people every year, without fail. In 1996, some of the most popular places were:

- Fort Robinson State Park (355,000 visitors)
- Scotts Bluff National Monument (132,166)
- Arbor Lodge State Historical Park & Museum (100,000)
- [Carhenge](#) (86,598)
- Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer (60,002)
- Buffalo Bill Ranch State Historical Park (28,446).



Objective language (27% usability improvement)

- using neutral rather than subjective, boastful, or exaggerated language (otherwise the same as the control condition)

Nebraska has several attractions. In 1996, some of the most-visited places were Fort Robinson State Park (355,000 visitors), Scotts Bluff National Monument (132,166), Arbor Lodge State Historical Park & Museum (100,000), [Carhenge](#) (86,598), Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer (60,002), and Buffalo Bill Ranch State Historical Park (28,446).



Combined version (124% usability improvement)

- using all three improvements in writing style together: concise, scannable, and objective

In 1996, six of the most-visited places in Nebraska were:

- Fort Robinson State Park
- Scotts Bluff National Monument
- Arbor Lodge State Historical Park & Museum
- Carhenge
- Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer
- Buffalo Bill Ranch State Historical Park



Write relevant content

It may be tempting to write about your brother's dog or your new car, but if it doesn't relate to your site or page topic, leave it out. Web readers want information, and unless the page is information about said dog, they really won't care, even if it is a good metaphor for what you're trying to say.



Put conclusions at the beginning

Think of an inverted pyramid when you write. Get to the point in the first paragraph, then expand upon it.

On the Web, the inverted pyramid becomes even more important since we know from several user studies that *users don't scroll*,(*) so they will very frequently be left to read only the top part of an article.

<http://virtuo.ca/en/24>



Write only one idea per paragraph

Web pages need to be concise and to-the-point.

People don't read Web pages, they scan them, so having short, meaty paragraphs is better than long rambling ones.

http://tmc-ottawa.com/en/Arrange_a_call-back_33.html



Use action words

Tell your readers what to do. Avoid the passive voice. Keep the flow of your pages moving.

<http://tmc-ottawa.com>

Arrange a call back – *better than* – Let us call you
Apply online – *better than* – Online application



Use lists instead of paragraphs

Lists are easier to scan than paragraphs, especially if you keep them short.



If you use paragraphs, keep them to a few lines and separate them.

This makes your text easier to read and search engines actually notice this.

http://asqtoronto.org/en/Why_Certify_47.html



Limit list items to 7 words

Studies have shown that people can only reliably remember 7-10 things at a time. By keeping your list items short, it helps your readers remember them.

www.virtuo.ca/en/24



Write short sentences

Sentences should be as concise as you can make them. Use only the words you need to get the essential information across.



Information Pollution

Excessive word count and worthless details are making it harder for people to extract useful information. The more you say, the more people tune out your message.

Studies of content usability typically find that removing half of a website's words will double the amount of information that users actually get.



Include internal sub-headings

Sub-headings make the text more scannable. Your readers will move to the section of the document that is most useful for them, and internal cues make it easier for them to do this.

<http://code.google.com/opensource/gsoc/2008/faqs.html>



Make your links part of the copy

Links are another way Web readers scan pages. They stand out from normal text, and provide more cues as to what the page is about.

www.thegreencity.com



Proofread your work

Typos and spelling errors will send people away from your pages. Make sure you proofread everything you post to the Web.



Show Numbers as Numerals When Writing for Online Readers

It's better to use "23" than "twenty-three" to catch users' eyes when they scan Web pages for facts, according to eyetracking data.



Chunking

Chunking is a principle that applies to the effective communication of information between human beings. It is particularly useful in the domain of written communication.

Principle: All information should be presented in small digestible items of information

This is particularly important online since you can control the sequence of how the user reads your content. (unlike a book)

www.virtuo.ca
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Bad site of this session

(Tell me if you are prone to seizures!)

<http://www.dokimos.org/ajff/>
