THE **EXCHANGE**

Write for the Web

An introductory guide to writing for the web and social media.

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How to Write for the Web

An introduction to writing for websites, blogs and selected social media channels.

Part 1 - Writing for the web

There has been extensive research done in the field of user experience (UX) and accessibility. The information is complex and often contested, however there are some generally accepted practices when writing for the web. Some things to keep in mind:

- **Under 1 minute** - the average time of a web page visit

The influential web usability researcher Jakob Nielsen summarised his research paper '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."

Nielsen's eye-tracking study from 2008 showed that:

- **28%** is the percentage of words read in an average page visit

People access the web on an almost constant basis using a growing variety of devices and screen sizes. While desktop computers and large screens are still common in offices the general trend is towards more and more lightweight, portable devices.

The popularity of smartphones significantly increases the likelihood of 'informal browsing':

- **65%** of US phone users use them within 15 minutes of waking

- **66%** of UK adults carry a smartphone

- **90%** of 16-24 year olds own one

- **50%** of 55-64 year olds own one

How do people read on the web?
People who use the web do not read in the same way that people read in print. Writing successfully for web readers, whatever device they are using, requires a different approach to structuring and presenting the content. People reading on the web tend to:

- Scan pages

- Pick out key words and phrases

- Read in quick, short bursts

- Are action oriented

- Click often and forage for snippets that lead to a goal

Users will read longer pages if the content they are reading directly relates to their specific goal. However, good web writing practices should always be employed.

Writing style
Traditional academic writing follows a pyramid style - laying a foundation using many sources, providing supporting research and gradually working up to a conclusion. Writing in this style requires users to do a lot of reading and it's not ideal for the web.

Good writing for the web follows the **inverted pyramid style**, which is borrowed from journalism. In this style, the most important information is presented first, with additional supporting detail to follow.

By putting the main idea first, readers can decide if the content is relevant and either read more or move on, avoiding reading multiple paragraphs of information only to find it was not what they were looking for.

Headings

It is important to communicate the essence of your concept or message of your writing up front. Invest time working on short, descriptive and meaningful headings.

Think of the journalistic model and create a good headline designed to immediately make a connection with your readers.

Subheadings

Follow this with a short subheading, two or three lines, that summarises the main content, just as you might see in a newspaper or magazine.

It's a good idea to study, and learn from, how journalists do this in print. By doing so you will enable the reader to make an informed decision about whether to read on or not.

Continue to use subheadings throughout your text. Break up the copy into sections and begin each section with a bold subheading of a few words.

Font-size

The recommended body font-size for best legibility is 16 pixels. That sounds large but it's not. Web browsers were intended to display at 16 pixels by default. The Exchange website uses 18 pixel font-size for body text. Larger sizes are used for headings and subheadings.

Line length

The optimal line length for body text is usually recommended to be 50-60 characters, including spaces. However, some sources suggest up to 75 characters is acceptable.

If a line is too long it's difficult to focus on the text because the line length makes it difficult to gauge where the line starts and ends. This will result in readers losing their place and finding your copy hard to read.

- Make extensive use of bullet points and lists

White space

Creating white space on a screen of text is a good way to relieve text density and improve legibility. Use line breaks and increase line spacing and this will make text much easier to read.

There will, of course, be situations where it just doesn't make sense to write short sentences and truncated paragraphs and we need to use judgement to determine if this, sometimes austere, method undermines the overall rhythm and meaning of our content.

The design of a textual web page should aim to achieve the right balance of all of these elements. There will be times to use subjective judgement and take into account the context.

The aim is to provide your audience with the best reading experience in order to increase the likelihood that they will continue to read.

Key points:

- Inverted pyramid structure

- Informative headings

- Meaningful subheadings that summarise main content

- Large fonts and short line length

- One idea per paragraph

- Concise sentences

- Highlight keywords

- Bulleted lists

- White space

The fold
This is an idea well known to interface designers, who talk about content being located 'above the fold' or 'below the fold'. The term refers to what is visible on the screen without scrolling.

The proliferation of different devices and screen sizes means the position of the fold in relation to content is fluid and difficult to predict but it's there on every screen.

The fold is an important concept because what appears above the fold is important. Logos, navigation and key messages are almost always located above the fold.

Users do scroll, but only if what's above the fold is interesting enough to motivate that action. What we see on the page without requiring any action is what encourages us to scroll.

Users often decide whether to stay or leave a web page based on what they see without scrolling.

- **20%** - average attention spent below the fold

Key points:

- Above the fold - easy to read, requires no interaction

- Below the fold - not easy to read, requires interaction

- Present essential information above the fold

Author credibility
Credibility and authenticity and are important for web users; it is often unclear who is presenting information online and whether a page can be trusted.

Credibility can be increased by good writing, and use of outbound links. Links to other sites show that the authors have done their

research and are not afraid to encourage readers visit other sites.

It reinforces your authenticity if you finish an article, or post, with a very brief biography (20-30 words) supported by links to a personal website, institutional profile, employer's website, email address or social media accounts.

Note
For long-form writing, users are more likely to print it out to read it. Consider providing an alternative downloadable format that will be legible and easy to read when printed.

Part 2 - Social Media

Social media has become extraordinarily pervasive in a short space of time. To put this into perspective, Twitter has been around for just ten years.

- **2.2 billion** - the number of social media users globally

- **30%** - percentage of the world's population using social media

The array of different platforms and shifting cultural and technical developments, that seemingly happen overnight, can be confusing but social media 'channels' are a great way to distribute your content, connect communities, develop professional networks and point people to richer content on blogs, websites and elsewhere.

What is Social Media?
Social media is a way for people to communicate and interact online. It's called social media because users engage with it in a **social context**, which includes conversation, commentary and other user-generated interactions. The tone of social media is, generally speaking, informal with very few exceptions such as LinkedIn which is designed for professional networking.

Social media platforms have enabled user-friendly content publishing and this has driven their uptake. Casual web users

are now able to easily create content on a growing number of platforms.

Social media platforms
There are hundreds of social media platforms and, with new ones appearing all the time, the landscape is constantly changing.

I have highlighted a selection of the most useful platforms below:

LinkedIn | Website: **https://www.linkedin.com**

LinkedIn facts:

- **100 million** + active users

- **30 million** - fastest growing demographic is students

- **12,174** followers - Arts Council England

What is it?
Founded in 2002, LinkedIn is the world's largest and most established professional/business focused social network. It connects colleagues and peers with each other and businesses with current and potential employees.

Customisable content feeds allow you to follow your key interests, people, organisations and companies. LinkedIn's potential lies in its power to build subject authority, establish thought leadership, and cultivate a meaningful professional network.

Use LinkedIn to:

- **Build** a professional profile

- **Affirm** your subject authority

- **Make** professional connections

- **Find** a job or business opportunity

- **Recruit** staff

Establishing yourself as an authority in your area of expertise will help build recognition and trust among your peers, both current and future.

In your professional life, if you use only one social network, use LinkedIn because it's the first place people look for information about you in a professional context.

LinkedIn tips:

· Fully complete your profile, there's scope for great detail

· Add images to your profile wherever possible

· Invite citations from colleagues and clients

· Use keywords in your profile e.g. research, art, science

· Connect with colleagues and thought leaders

· Upload content such as papers and presentations

· Join Linkedin groups where colleagues and others contribute

· Open a Linkedin company page for your business or institution

Twitter | Website: **https://twitter.com**

Twitter facts:

· **320 million** + active users

· **72%** of active users on Twitter are aged between 18-49

· **116,000** followers - The Royal Society on Twitter

What is Twitter?
Founded in 2006, Twitter's 140-character text and image updates have transformed global access to real-time information.

Twitter's pared back simplicity enables sharing of information, content and links from breaking news to worldwide politics.

In a saturated media landscape Twitter has a huge appeal and is the perfect format for reading on mobile devices.

Twitter is the primary source for immediate topical commentary and news updates. Much of the reporting from the Arab Spring uprisings was done directly through Twitter.

Use Twitter to:

- **Create** a 'micro profile' - space is limited

- **Share** links to richer content and your websites

- **Post** real time updates from events, conferences, openings etc.

- **Publish** short-form announcements

- **Engage** in conversations with friends and colleagues

- **Follow** experts in your field

- **Promote** new opportunities and products

Due to its usually (you can create a private account) public nature, Twitter's most powerful use is connecting people. The platform allows complete strangers to connect over common interests and ideas and to participate in conversations from the mundane to the incredibly important.

Twitter tips:

- Follow your current connections and your target audiences

- Organise your connections into lists and drive engagement

- Connect and engage with thought leaders

- Provide value by Tweeting and re-tweeting interesting content

- Engage in conversation – 40% of your content is conversation

- Use '@' Twitter handles to mention people

- Hashtags (#research, #design) help users find your content

- Attracting more followers increases your reach

Facebook | Website: **https://www.facebook.com**

Facebook facts:

- **1.5 billion** + active users

- **750 million** + users access Facebook on mobiles each month

- **9,019** likes - Women in Research community on Facebook

What is Facebook?
Facebook started in 2004 as a local social network for college students. More than 1.5 billion active users later, Facebook is the world's most popular social network.

Facebook is so popular that it has become an essential tool in the social life of millions of users worldwide.

For millions of people Facebook is the only social network they use, although the level of engagement varies across the user spectrum.

From those that check the network periodically throughout the week to those who are almost compulsively active, the core driving force to participation is connection - connecting with colleagues, friends old and new, alumni networks, and for an increasing percentage of users, professional connections.

Considered by organisations and businesses of every description as an essential platform for engaging with audiences and customers it can also be used as a content aggregator, where your selected content feeds are streamed into your newsfeed.

Use Facebook to:

- **Present** a more detailed profile than Twitter allows

- **Provide** links to richer content and websites

- **Connect** with friends, family and colleagues

- **Share** images, image collections and video

- **Create** short written pieces to accompany images etc.

- **Aggregate** content you're interested via the news feed

Facebook tips:

- Share high-quality multimedia content

- Ask questions and invite opinions to increase interaction

- Converse with those who engage with your content

- Complete all of your profile, providing links to external websites

- Set a custom URL, e.g. facebook.com/wearetheexchange

- Connect your Facebook page to other social media accounts

- Take control of your privacy

Instagram | Website: **https://www.instagram.com**

Instagram facts:

- **300 million** + active users

- **21k** followers - Ai Weiwei

- **11.9 million** followers - NASA on Instagram

What is Instagram?
Launched in 2010 as a free mobile app, Instagram is a photo and video sharing service which allows users to share images that can be processed using a wide variety of (typically 'retro style') photographic filters.

Instagram was acquired by Facebook in 2012 for approximately US$1 billion. In 2013, Instagram grew by 23%, compared to Facebook, which only grew by 3%.

Instagram is a visual first platform. It is very popular with photographers, artists, scientists and people interested in travel, fashion, art, craft, architecture, graphics, design, pop culture or anything of a highly visual nature.

Use Instagram to:

• **Share** images and short videos

• **Explore** creating visually interesting content

• **Follow** accounts with strong visual content

• **Share** 'behind the scenes' info - works well on Instagram

Although there is a website Instagram is primarily a mobile-first application designed to enable its users to create content on the move.

Instagram tips:

• Use extensive hashtags (#art) to help users find content

• Strong visuals work best

• Write short, friendly, informal comments

• Reply to comments left by visitors

• Follow your target audiences and interact with their content

References and Further Reading

Examples of accessibility best practice

Organisations lead the way due to the rapidly evolving technology context and the extensive resources needed. Strict adherence to accessibility principles often leads to uninspiring websites, for example GOV.UK, but the site does represent excellence in accessibility terms. By contrast the Guardian newspaper website balances excellent usability and user experience with great design.

UK Government | **https://www.gov.uk**

Guardian newspaper | **http://www.theguardian.com/uk**

NESTA | **http://www.nesta.org.uk**

RIBA | **https://www.architecture.com/RIBA/Home.aspx**

General references and further reading

The list below is a mixture of sources that were referenced when writing this guide and some useful starting points that will help you explore this field in more depth.

Ofcom - The UK is now a smartphone society
http://media.ofcom.org.uk/news/2015/cmr-uk-2015

The Chief Marketing Officer (CMO) Council
https://www.cmocouncil.org/facts-stats-categories.php?view=all&category=mobile-marketing

Web Design is 95% Typography
https://ia.net/blog/the-web-is-all-about-typography-period

References and Further Reading

Jakob Nielsen on Wikipedia
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jakob_Nielsen_(usability_consultant)

How Users Read on the Web by Jakob Nielsen
https://www.nngroup.com/articles/how-users-read-on-the-web/

How Little Do Users Read? by Jakob Nielsen
https://www.nngroup.com/articles/how-little-do-users-read/

Readability: the Optimal Line Length
http://baymard.com/blog/line-length-readability

THE 100% EASY-2-READ STANDARD
https://ia.net/know-how/100e2r

Proven Ideal Length of Every Tweet ...
http://www.fastcompany.com/3028656/work-smart/the-proven-ideal-length-of-every-tweet-facebook-post-and-headline-online

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