

Flinders University Writing for the Web



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Consider how readers use the web

Readers process information on web pages differently than on printed pages.

Studies show that:

- 80% of people scan the screen for keywords or phrases rather than reading word-for-word
- reading from a computer screen is 25% slower than reading from the printed page
- readers prefer not to scroll down through lengthy web pages.

Therefore, web text needs to be much more concise. Aim to cut equivalent printed text by about 50%.

With more people reading websites from mobile devices, these factors become increasingly important.

Useful planning steps when writing

1. Understand the purpose of the content, and the communication and information needs of your target audience.
2. Decide on the major headings and sections for each page.
3. Write down the minor points under each section.
4. Add any points relating to potential content management implications under each section.
5. Add relevant links against points.
6. Write each minor point as a paragraph/list/dot point.
7. Write a short summary of the page.
8. Shorten the summary into an informative title.

Best practice when writing for the web

Consider the purpose of the web content

Knowing the purpose of the web content will determine what information you will need and where the content will live on the website.

If you know the aim of the content then it will make it a lot easier to write it.

Tip: Ask yourself, *what is the intent of the content and what do you want people to do after looking at it.*

Write for your target audience

Know who your target audience is. Remember they might not be familiar with University structure and terms, and English might be their second language.

The main audiences for University web pages are:

- future students
- current students
- international students
- alumni and donors

- business and industry
- news and media
- staff.

Tip: *Imagine yourself talking to your target audience. Reflect this in your writing.*

Split your content into chunks

Because readers scan web pages it's good practice to break your web content down into digestible chunks. When web pages are too long users lose interest unless the content is absolutely relevant to them.

Keep page length **short** without compromising depth of content by splitting content into multiple pages connected by hyperlinks.

Tip: *Make each page focus on a separate topic and connect to other topics by links.*

Make each page self-explanatory

Readers of your web page can arrive at any page via search engines, or they may have bookmarked a specific page rather than the homepage.

Don't expect that they will work their way through your web content from the homepage.

Tip: *Each web page should be able to stand-alone. Understanding the content of a page should not depend on a reader having arrived at it from a previous page.*

Tip: *Use links to relevant information for further understanding of the topic if necessary.*

Make content easy to scan

Website readers scan the webpage looking for information they require and if they can't find it they'll move on.

Break up the content so it's easily scanned.

Tip: *The page heading should summarise what the page is about.*

Tip: *A short summary at the top of the page helps the reader understand if the page is useful and if they should continue reading.*

Tip: *Break down remaining text into short sections with subheadings. Have one idea per paragraph.*

Tip: *Use bullets and numbered lists to separate ideas in sentences.*

Tip: *Group other useful links to additional information at the end or side of the page.*

Titles and headings

Headings should be in lower case with an initial capital (sentence case) and no full stop at the end.

Headings are important scanning devices and should clearly indicate the content of the page or section. Use heading styles within the content management system.

Tip: *Keep characters limit of headings to no more than around 60 characters.*

Tip: *Don't start headings with 'A' or 'The'. Put the most important words at the beginning.*

Tip: *Keep subheadings to no more than three hierarchy levels. Any more is confusing and difficult for readers to follow.*

Summary paragraph

The summary paragraph at the top of the page should immediately convey the main purpose.

Tip: *Be brief. Limit the summary to two or three short sentences.*

Highlighting

Highlight key words emphasising minor points to catch the scanning eye. It also makes it easier to pick out sections readers want when re-reading a page.

Highlighting can be used more and with greater impact on the web than in print, but use sparingly.

Tip: *Words are usually highlighted with bold text*

Tip: *Highlight only information-carrying words or words that you wish to draw the reader's attention to.*

DO NOT use underline or [blue](#) to highlight text as they can be confused with links.

DO NOT use capital letters. THEY ARE HARD TO READ AND SLOW THE READING PROCESS EVEN FURTHER.

DO NOT **bold whole sentences or paragraphs as they will dominate the page and make it difficult to scan for important points.**

DO NOT *use italics for blocks of text as they are also slow to read online. Use only when necessary to highlight a quote.*

Bulleted and numbered lists

Numbered and dot point lists slow down the scanning eye and can be used more effectively on the web than in print.

Try to limit items in a list to less than ten.

Tip: *Use numbered lists when order of items is important, or when related text refers to a specific item from the list.*

Tip: *Use bullets when the order of the list items is not so important.*

Write meaningful link text

When creating a hyperlink make it easy for the reader to understand what they are clicking to. Usually you'll use the same hyperlink text as the name of the page you're linking to. This helps with search engine optimisation as well.

Use: See our [News and events](#) for the latest updates.

DON'T USE: [Click here](#) to access our news and events.

Use: Further information about using [text matching software](#).

DON'T USE: For further information go to <http://www.flinders.edu.au/teach/aims/detection/index.php>.

Include file information for downloadable documents

It is good usability and accessibility practice to advise users that a particular link refers to a downloadable file.

Provide meaningful link text as to the name of the document, the type of the document, and its size.

Ask yourself whether you need to add a separate downloadable file or whether that content is better off as a web page.

Use: [The Complete SET Manual \(PDF 111 KB\)](#) provides the complete list of questions.

Note: If you are using the content management system (CMS), the file manager will automatically do this as part of the default insert file behaviour.

Optimising content for Search Engine Optimisation (SEO)

What is SEO?

SEO is about developing your content so that when people use a search engine, the webpages you've written appear (hopefully at or near the top) of the search results.

How to optimise your content for good SEO results

Tip: Write relevant and useful content using tips in this guide.

Tip: When creating a page give it a meaningful page name. This forms the web address and the page heading.

Tip: Add a description and keyword metadata to each page in the Content Management System.

Tip: Make your link text meaningful so it can stand-alone if read out of context.

Tip: Optimise your images as well as your writing. Give the image a relevant name, and add alt text in the CMS.

Inclusive language

Language should not exclude or discriminate against any group or section of the community. It should be gender neutral and non-racist in tone, and show respect for people who are disabled, older, younger, or from other language backgrounds. Use common sense. A sentence can often be rewritten to avoid discriminatory phrases or the need to substitute words.

Gender neutral language

Use:

business person / businessperson / owner
chairperson / the chair / convener
fishing licensee / angler
supervisor / work supervisor
police officer
tradesperson / trader
representative / official
worker / employee
working hours
human resources / labour force / personnel / staff.

Don't Use

businessman
chairman
fisherman
foreman
policeman
tradesman
spokesman
workman
man-hours
manpower.

Indigenous peoples

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission recommends use the following terminology to designate the original inhabitants of Australia and their descendants:

Use:

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
Indigenous Australians
Indigenous peoples.

Ethnolinguistic groups

Use:

people from other language backgrounds
people from non-English-speaking backgrounds

Don't use:

New Australians
ethnic
migrants
immigrants

Note: exemptions may be appropriate for content written in an academic context.

People with disabilities

Disabled people are depersonalised by language in which they are treated as a disability rather than a person with a disability.

Use:

persons with a disability / disabled persons / disabled people
blind people / people with a visual impairment
people with a disability / people with a handicap
physically disabled people / people with physical disabilities
deaf people / hearing-impaired persons

Don't use:

the disabled
the blind
the handicapped
the physically handicapped
the deaf

In relation to age

Use:

older people / seniors / senior citizens
young persons / young people

Don't use

the aged / the old
youth / the young

Style and spelling

Use the [Flinders University Web Style Sheet](#) for many of the common words and terms you might need to use.

Before publishing your content

Proofreading

Proofreading is essential to ensure the quality of your web content. It is hard to proofread your own writing, so it is often beneficial to have a fresh set of eyes review your work. If you can't have someone else proofread your work, it is a good idea to:

- leave the work aside for a little while (a day or a week, if you have the time) and look at it again when you are fresh
- proofread in a different setting – away from your desk, for example
- if you have been working on screen, print the document and proofread it on paper
- read from back to front, section by section
- read it out loud.

All these strategies trick your brain into thinking it has not read the material before. This can improve concentration and help identify problems.

Proofreading checklist

Yes, there is a lot to think about when proofreading! All the elements of this guide have to come together.

Here is a proofreading checklist that might help you produce quality web content:

- Have you written your content with your target audience in mind?
- Have you split your content into chunks?
- Have you made each web page self-explanatory?
- Is your writing style concise, personal and direct?
- Have you used techniques to make your content easy to scan?
- Have you written meaningful link text?

- Have you provided contextual content for file downloads?
- Have you written meaningful headings and a summary at the top of the page?
- Have you used Flinders tone of voice for content when writing?
- Have you complied with the Flinders University Style Sheet and The Macquarie Dictionary?
- Have you explained acronyms?
- Have you added metadata to each page?
- Do your web page lists use correct punctuation?
- Have you used inclusive language?

Approval

All new web material must be appropriately approved before publication.

If you have Editor rights in the content management system the approval process will be automated in the workflow, requiring the approval of the allocated 'Publisher' prior to publication.

Other relevant approvals may be necessary based on the nature of the content and its relationship to the existing policies and procedures.

Useful resources about style and writing for the web

Books

Australian spelling:

- The Macquarie Dictionary, 5th edition.

A great short and easy-to-read book about web usability:

- Don't make me think, Steve Krug

Guidance and recommendations for publications in print or electronic format:

- Style Manual for Authors, Editors and Printers

Websites

Jakob Nielsen has done a great deal of research on the usability and scannability of web pages. Some useful articles he's done about web writing are:

- Be succinct! Writing for the web, Jakob Nielsen, <http://www.useit.com/alertbox/9703b.html>
- Applying writing guidelines to web pages, John Morkes and Jakob Nielsen, <http://www.useit.com/papers/webwriting/rewriting.html>
- Concise, scannable, and objective: how to write for the web, John Morkes and Jakob Nielsen, <http://www.useit.com/papers/webwriting/writing.html>

This guide by Website Criteria is used by the South Australian government and includes lots of examples about what to use and what to avoid when writing for the web.

- Website Writing Guide http://www.websitecriteria.com/Website_guidelines/website_writing_guide.html
- Search engine optimisation (SEO) <https://www.google.com/.../search-engine-optimization-starter-guide.pdf>

Writing for the web - top tips

Print this out and pin it up at your desk as a quick reference tool when writing for the web.

Tip: Ask yourself, what is the intent of the content and what do you want people to do after looking at it.

Tip: Imagine yourself talking to your target audience. Reflect this in your writing.

Tip: Each web page should be able to stand-alone. Understanding the content of a page should not depend on a reader having arrived at it from a previous page.

Tip: The page heading should summarise what the page is about.

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Tip: Keep subheadings to no more than three hierarchy levels. Any more is confusing and difficult for readers to follow.

Tip: Use bullets and numbered lists to separate ideas in sentences.

Tip: Use numbered lists when order of items is important, or when related text refers to a specific item from the list.

Tip: Use bullets when the order of the list items is not so important.

Tip: Add a description and keyword metadata to each page in the Content Management System.

Tip: Make your link text meaningful so it can stand-alone if read out of context.

Tip: Optimise your images as well as your writing. Give the image a relevant name, and add alt text in the CMS.

Tip: Check for and fix broken links. Search engines can't crawl your site if there are broken links.

To view the full Writing for the Web guide, see: <http://www.flinders.edu.au/webwriting>